The liveliness of the universe from a philosophical perspective

By Timo Schmitz, Philosopher

In philosophical history, there has been three common views how to regard the cosmos. The first view saw the cosmos as two-parted (heaven and hell) in which the sky was the rooftop, which was a very common view in early history. The theory developed further in a theological view that the cosmos is a universe and the earth is just a planet within, and scientists developed the theory that the universe must be a kind of materia that is driven by its first big bang and the still existing force, within a kind of room that is eternal. Another very old idea is to see the cosmos as living being. Here, however, we meet a problem. The idea of a living cosmos is mainly promoted in esoterical and spiritual groups and the possibility of doing scientific research on this thesis is difficult, because conspiracy theorizers and several new religious movements misused this theory so much, that it is difficult to promote a philosophical discourse which is taken seriously. This paper tries neither to prove nor deny the cosmos as a ‘living-being’ since it is not yet empirically possible. It tries to give theological and theogenic stances, as well as traditional views, on which conditions have to be found that this thesis can be valid. Thus, I want to give a framework on what a living universe is, and where the door to humbug starts. At first, we have to face a problem on how we see the world. We often use earth-centered argumentation, which means that we say ‘the earth is located at a certain spot in the universe’, but we imply that there is an earth and a universe. As a common citizen, no one asks oneself how the universe interacts, as the world has enough internal problems, like wars and political disasters, so why shall one matter about the universe? Many people see the cosmos simply as a mass of dead materia in which we can find here and there some life if water exists, or at least possible life. However, this view only arouse in modern physics. In traditional philosophy, religion, and shamanic traditions, the universe has always been regarded to be a living being. Plato talked of the world soul, Daoism talked about the Qi, Hinduism about paratman, Aristotle about the first substance, and Pre-Socratics about a basic element of which everything in the world arises. If one compares Aristotle’s Physics and the modern subject, one can see that the modern subject is abstract and for many it is far
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too ungraspable. Anyone can read history books as hobby, or political books, but who grasps a book about deep-rooted physics to relax after a work day? The problem that physics faces is also pointed out by Lee Smolin who comes to the point that “Newtonian physics is useful, even if it is not true, as an approximation that helps us to understand many different phenomena. But it is completely discredited as an answer to any fundamental question about what the world is. It has a great deal of historical and philosophical interest, but this is rarely mentioned in beginning courses. Thus, it is not surprising if students find the subject uninspiring. But, beyond the fact that they are given little reason to believe in it, I find that students simply are not drawn to the description of the world offered by Newtonian physics. Once I suspected this I began to ask myself what exactly is it that they don’t like about the Newtonian view of the cosmos? I believe that the answer is that there is no place for life in the Newtonian universe. On the basis of the physics that was known in the nineteenth century, it is impossible to perceive a connection between ourselves as living things and the rest of the universe. But physics must provide a way to understand what life is and why we are here. It is the “science of everything” whose task is to uncover those facts and laws that apply universally. Physics must underlie and explain biology because living creatures, like all things in the universe, are made out of atoms which obey the same laws as do every other atom in the world. An approach to physics that does not make the existence of life comprehensible must eventually give way to one that does."¹ This undermines the world-centered view, as there is one earth and a universe, and both are regarded separately. Normal school physics rarely concentrate on questions connecting the universe and the earth, but mainly focus on phenomena that appear in the universe and phenomena that appear on the earth, each for its own. Duane Elgin points out that: “A common assumption of the modern world is that we live in a universe comprised almost entirely of inert matter and empty space. Regarding the universe as dead at its foundations is basic to the industrial revolution: It makes sense to exploit what appears dead for the benefit of what seems most alive — ourselves. This assumption is now being questioned as a more ancient view is reconsidered. Plato put it this way: ‘The universe is a single living creature that encompasses all living creatures within it.’”² For a long time, physicists thought that the proton is the smallest particle which exists, and thus the name is derived from Greek πρῶτον, which means ‘first’; or πρῶτος, which means ‘the first’ or the ‘foremost’. Nowadays, however, it is known that there are particles that are much smaller than the protons. Who knows if there are much much smaller one’s, that are so small that we hardly know that everything is alive. The famous “πάντα ῥεῖ” which is attributed to the ancient philosopher Heraklitos, already is often interpreted in a way that
everything on the earth is in a constant flow. A mountain is not a dead thing, it is moving, even if it is just moving a few centimeters, as the mountain is not isolated, but heat and cold are interfering\(^3\). There are many aspects which form a mountain, despite temperature, it is the weather, the human environment, the biological reservoir (as the trees and animals are living on the mountain as well), and thus everything is in a constant move and forms new things. Rivers, caves, minerals, all kind of things are formed on this. The trees have a life-span, they die one day and build the resources for new life. But almost no one looks further. A tree is not just a tree. The tree is build up out of cells, and the cells are build up on materia again, thus there must be a first materia, something which is the smallest materia on which everything is built. Aristotle spoke about the στοιχεῖον, which is described to be “the rudiments with which mankind . . . were indoctrinated (before the time of Christ)” and “‘cosmic spirits’ (DNTT, 2, 828)”\(^4\). Thus, it is an “ancient astral beings associated with the very beginning (make-up) of the earth”\(^4\). However, everything has an οὐσία, which means a kind of substance which forms the Being, thus it is often called first substance. Anyways, there is not only ousia as such, but also protai ousiai, which means the first of the first substance, so without this, nothing else could exist. Here again, one finds the idea that there is a basic substance which creates existence. Nowadays, we believe that the universe is created out of a big bang, thus we can call the big bang the first substance. Then why do we watch everything in the universe to be dead and standing for itself? The sun is alive, we know it, because it is not just a big hot star, but the materia on the sun is moving. We know many elements of the universe but by far not all of them. So there might be a small particle which is the smallest of all particles which might be the link to everything. Thus, the way this particle behaves must be taken into consideration to explain everything, since the theory of the dead universe is scarce. It is just an assumption, such as my thesis.

So until now, we look on everything from a theological point (a cosmic element as first element), the philosophical standpoints that there might be a first substance on which everything goes back and forms the origin from a starting point (ἀρχή), and the idea that everything is in interaction with another thing.

Now let’s combine both views. A famous religion which combines philosophy and theology is Daoism. In the beginning there was the Dao which created everything. Let’s say, instead of the Dao there might be a first element. No matter whether it created everything through a big bang or another event, this first element split apart into all its parts and formed new things through the alignment of several elements. The products of several elements if being joined form new elements. Everything is created out of it. It’s like the Daoist Yin and Yang principle,
as there must be a certain amount of Yin and a certain amount of Yang to create something as it is. We can use it as analogy. There must be a certain amount of one element to create a certain thing. So why shall everything in the universe shall stand for itself? Everything in the universe interacts with one another and creates and recreates new things any second. It is a large interacting living cosmos. If this is the case, then it must fulfill the following frame: A living cosmos is not determined by a God or spiritual force, the way things interact must be explainable on a rational basis or measured empirically. All kind of forces must be physical forces, they don’t come and go as they want, they have their interaction and they always follow the physical laws. If everything is living, then one must put the theory of chaos into consideration. How does the interaction change? Are the forces getting stronger or are they getting lower? What does it mean for the formation of new objects like stars and asteroids? Why do we think that everything has a divine order in the universe? We cannot say what happens tomorrow. There are a lot of factors that might determine an event depending on several interrelations. However, physical studies make it possible to make assumptions through mathematics and thus tell us when an object arrives on earth or how things move in the universe.

Let’s go further. If the universe is already an empty space, then how can holes be formed? So to say empty space into empty space. And how can these holes be of eternal length without an end? How can something be created out of nothing? (Actually black holes are a process of a collapse, where the body collapses within itself, as far as I understand it.) If one gives me a small amount of minerals I can join them to metal and make a coin, but how can I make a coin if I have nothing? If this worked to create coins out of nothing then I would be rich now. Thus, if the universe is alive, it must have a kind of particle, that is so small that it can create a new substance when joining with other particles. These particles must be in constant movement. To understand this idea we have to look down on the universe, and not look up to the universe from the earth. Scientists have to create a paradigm how to find this particle. It is so small and so light that it can’t be seen and hardly measured by weight. We even find this idea in traditional philosophies and religions. Plato talked about the Good or the One, which is so light that it is not further determinable and everything is created through it. Early Christians later called it “God”. Daoists believe in a highest principle through which everything is created but it has no specific form and thus cannot be perceived as such. Early Buddhists believed that this world is just one world out of many and that there must be many ‘buddha worlds’. Hinduism came to the conclusion that the whole universe is like a supersoul and the world is a smaller soul which is part of it and human-beings are a small soul and all
souls can be joined to be freed. Tengrists believe in an eternal blue sky which is ruled by a holy spirit – the Goddess of Fertility. Her name ‘Umai’ means ‘womb’ or ‘embryo’ and all kind of life is a gift by her. Despite that, the earth was seen as manifestation of the mother, thus everything on the earth goes back to the creator. Native Americans have a strong believe in nature and its interaction, their highest principle is an all embracing Great Spirit which is universal. It is a powerful force that guides the people with wisdom and is responsible for creation.

As we can see, in most traditional religions, there was not just a God who created something and human-beings had to obey, but there was a cosmic principle, which saw the earth and the universe as one entity. Everything is connected to each other. However, ancient people did not have the means to prove the existence of these smallest elements, they had to use spirits, forces and gods to explain phenomena. Even nowadays, science can not explain everything. We can not really explain where everything comes from. But one thing is clear: If we die, we go back into the smaller entities. The body is nourishment for the environment, and the body breaks in itself, thus everything goes back to nature. All cells create new things. The whole dead body is the basis for a new creation. Without the body, new creation is impossible, since the body gives something back to nature and nourishes the earth and thus is part of a process for creating new things. There are millions of small beings in one hand full of earth. Now imagine all the earth where trees are growing, how many small beings are living there: worms, bacteria, microanimals, etc. They all just make the life of the trees possible. The trees make life for human-beings possible, through CO2-transformation. So why shouldn’t the universe act in the same way? Why shouldn’t there be smallest bacterias and microanimals on the surface of the moon where water was found? Why shouldn’t there be smallest cells? Everything is in constant motion. So despite the fact that the smallest entity must have a logical existence, it must be in everything. We can only find it through splitting the smallest particles further. We don’t need to find a completely new element, we have to find the smallest elements within the elements. Though being alive, the universe has no divine plan, thus if the universe is alive, it is dependent on the theory of chaos and on complex mathematics on motion. We can assume that the element is not conscious of what it is doing or has any knowledge, thus it’s just acting after its nature. However, if one speaks up on a smallest element that knows what it is doing and acts after a perfect plan, then we reach the door of humbug. The same happens to the idea that this particles could have energies that we might use and other stuff that might affect us. We survived the last thousand of years, so why shall it affect us that much? Even if the universe is alive, it won’t be a revolution of
everything, there won’t be energy fields that block our health or a way to communicate with alien spirits or whatever. All these things are part of the esoterical-spiritual industries and only commerce. The idea that the universe is alive indeed is not that spectacular. It just says that everything in the world must go back to one element, so all elements go back to this very element and that this element is not only on earth, but also in the universe. If it exists, it must be that small, that it is hardly measurable, and for this reason it is not found yet. If the theory is wrong however, then it means that thousand of years of philosophy all around the world had the wrong basic assumption on the world and religion was founded on a wrong premise, even further, God would have no right to exist then, since God is the placeholder for the very first element that served as creator.

However, if we use this frame as reference, then we can get a new view on our position in the universe and reform science, find new paradigms, and explain the phenomena in their interdependencies and understand interrelations. However, for normal citizens just as you and me it won’t change anything in our daily life.

Notes:


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