

Balance, Stillness, Vertigo – Myths of Cosmic Centrality in Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera

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Abstract

Contemporary images of decentred information find their origin in myths of cosmic centrality and revolutions. Images such as Deleuze's decentred rhizome and Derrida's acentric free-play have influenced contemporary understanding of political phenomena and internet media, but their connection to mythical imagery has gone unremarked. In this study, I analyse the mythical images of cosmic centrality as interpreted by Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera, in order to point out how they function as models of philosophical autonomy amidst diverging and dispersed information. This study suggests that the image of the centre is not opposed to mere liberating dispersion, whereby centrality becomes a synonym of repressive control; the centre is rather opposed to an ambivalent field of dispersion and control, thus making the centre itself a locus of intellectual freedom.

Keywords: Centrality; Plato; Nietzsche; Kundera; Philosophy; Myth.

1. Introduction: the image of the centre between myths and information technology

Cosmic revolutions and centrality are mythical images of the cosmic order that recur throughout the whole of Western history, and assume varied meanings in relation to knowledge, ethics, and politics. These myths are defined through their variation. Much like language, mythical images are not individual objects identifiable through their individual essence, but acquire their meaning through their interaction with other images, and through their reception in different moments and places. Variants of a myth are, in fact, what *constitutes* a myth, either as grounded on a permanent structure (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 233-236), or as a net of receptions open to hermeneutical analysis (Blumenberg 1979: 174-176). My study will not try to identify a structure, but it will proceed in agreement with Hans Blumenberg's stance (*ibi*, 174): "the myth that is varied and transformed by its receptions [...] deserves to be made a subject of study" independently from a hypothetical fundamental myth (*Grundmythos*). If myths remain operative even nowadays, in different forms, it is because they are received through different media, they alter the structures through which we think and perceive, and they maintain a power that can only be shown case by case (cf. Kittay 1987 and Lakoff

1980 for similar accounts of the cognitive force of metaphor). In short, myths keep orienting the way we perceive and understand our world through different, and ultimately subjective, reinterpretations.

Myths of cosmic revolutions and their centre ground the contemporary language of centrality and of its lack. This language describes a problem that ranges from the fluid space of mass-media (especially internet and social media), through the socio-political reality, to philosophy itself. We assist nowadays to a de-centralisation of knowledge and information, which covers the entire field of human experience. Back in 1980, as philosopher Guido Cusinato observes, Deleuze and Guattari proposed a liberal, acentric organization of knowledge, rejecting the traditional tree-like model of rationality, and proposing a *rhizomatic* net of interactions among various points of knowledge and experience. The rhizome, a net of airborne roots, is configured as "an acentric and non-significant system, in which there is no apex [nor any common root or central axis], and where any point is freely connected to any other" (Cusinato 2013, p.38, tr. mine; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Similarly, against the ideal of all-encompassing intellectual structures in the human sciences, in 1966 Derrida had opposed the traditional idea of a foundational centre to that of de-regulated free-play: "The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the [*free*] play of the structure." (2005: 352).

Derrida argues that, in our times, the Western obsession with centralised systems of knowledge has collapsed and, "in the absence of a centre or origin", an interplay of different languages and discourses has become predominant, with no central, structuring object or objective (353-4).

The models of acentric rhizome and decentred free-play have had, and still have, strong social, political, and intellectual repercussions. The neo-liberal model of politics is one of unhindered and divergent motivations, where the criterion of political action is not one of centralised ideals, but of deregulation of individual initiative. Cusinato identifies a structural and historical convergence between neoliberalism and nihilistic relativism (i.e. the acentric dispersion of values and opinions), since both conceive freedom as "deregulation", against all external impositions of structures and limits to actions or desires (2013: 40; cf. Lyotard 1979). As the unexpected consequence of such conception, we face nowadays the ever stronger emergence of particularisms against all-encompassing projects such as the European Union. At the same time, international relations proceed more and more along the line of particular, shifting economic interests. This phenomenon is also correlative to the contemporary decentred structure of information. With the expansion of the internet, the mass-media have developed within a 'hyper-textual' frame, where information and even social relations do not proceed in a centralised way and according to an organised structure, but along diverging lines.

Critical theorist George Landow observes, accordingly, that "decentredness" is a defining feature of the hypertext, which coincides with Derrida's textual free-play and Deleuze's rhizome, in that their decentred structure "perfectly matches the way

clusters or subwebs organize themselves in a large networked hypertext environments” (2006: 59). We can think, for instance, of Wikipedia, which diverges from the Enlightenment ideal of an *en-cyclo*-paedia, an organised ‘circle’ of information revolving around a centralised ideal of knowledge; Wikipedia, instead, has turned the encyclopaedia into an open, cooperative space, where the user finds instant, quick (in Hawaiian, ‘wiki’) links to all other relevant articles. Moreover, we can think of social-media, where information appears as an ever-shifting line of information, and where friends or interests are selected and stored in cumulative lists. While these developments certainly have a strong democratic power of direct participation and offer positive chances for serendipity and discovery, they also raise two fundamental problems: disorientation and filtering of information. For instance, Landow has observed that disorientation is an inherent (either positive or negative) possibility of hypertexts that programmers constantly need to consider (2006: 145-151); and IT ethics expert Engin Bozdag has studied the way information intermediaries (Facebook, Google) tend to channel and regulate information in a way that is out of individual control, through the creation of ‘filter bubbles’, where privileged information is automatically selected by algorithms and creates a radically private space that may enhance personal bias (2013: 209-227). As Guido Cusinato comments, decentred structures of information can originate a “liquidity that nurtures the individual’s illusion of not being oriented”, i.e. of being free to create his or her own decentred connections, while in reality it directs this very decentred liquidity, because “what is liquid [...] is maximally susceptible to being channelled” (2013: 53). Politically, this channelled liquidity results in highly controversial mass-phenomena, such as the recent Brexit vote or the American elections, where the unexpected success of divisive positions has been widely based on disinformation and partisan positions: the filtered information allowed by hyper-textual media, arguably, has had the result of polarising oppositions, whereby the factual truth of the information delivered (on either side) has become less and less relevant. Philosophically, this problem is that of nihilistic relativism, as a completely disoriented existential, social, and political condition. Here, neoliberal decentred freedoms find a momentary *impasse*, and require to be rethought and reaffirmed.

The three images I present here deal differently with this problem of centrality as a problematic point of orientation, and they offer valid models for understanding these phenomena of centrality, dispersion, and polarisation, and to reflect on them in new critical ways, alternative to the standard models of rhizome and free-play.

2. Methodology

I will compare three mythical images where the cosmic order of centred revolutions becomes a model of intellectual freedom, ethical change, and philosophical orientation amidst conflicting information. These images are mythical insofar as they can be traced back not simply to a rationalistic understanding of the cosmic order, but to an effort of interpreting the human significance of this very order. The mythical universe is always alive, animated at least in part by intellects, desires, drives, and intentions, and it changes with them. It is such a universe that is represented, differently,

by philosophical writers as distant as Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera. They can be comparatively connected because of their mutual influence and common philosophical focus on the image of a cosmic revolution around a physical centre, within a single theoretical problem. They all avail of the potential of mythical imagery to create specific models of philosophical autonomy and orientation, which still underlie, implicitly, contemporary language and conceptions. Such a comparative approach is undoubtedly partial, in historical and philological terms, since it overlooks wide changes in cosmological imagery and symbolism of circularity from Classicism to Modernity; nonetheless, it is possible to trace the coherent recurrence of a single image, characterised by stable themes, within a limited number of authors. Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera are particularly significant because the problems they tackle are still vital nowadays, and in need of philosophical orientation. The contemporary models of decentred information find their unconscious root in mythical images, which can be brought back to awareness in order to allow a reflective comparison (cf. Mosco 2004: 83; Landow 2006: xii).

3. Plato: Cosmic Revolutions and Centred Balance

Plato wrote in the 5th century B.C.E., a time when Greece, and Athens in particular, saw the rise of the Sophists, travelling intellectuals and rhetoricians, who contested traditional morality and promoted moral relativism. Sophists, as Plato describes them, are a class “that wanders from city to city and has no private home” (*Tim.* 19e), and therefore does not possess any fixed political values. In a sense, however, these ‘international’ travellers brought about Athens’ cultural development, forcing thinkers to defend ethical and political positions, precisely through their relativism. Plato’s philosophy is a philosophical response to the sophistic “overturning upwards and downwards” (*Gorg.* 481d-e) of discourses, opinions, and values, in search for principles of intellectual and ethical orientation. He used myths and images in a constant attempt to discover and communicate such principles, not dogmatically, but through constant inquiry and dialogue. One of Plato’s most significant images, in this regard, is that of cosmic balance: Plato’s universe is spherical, geocentric, and revolving in circular motion, in perfect equipoise around its central axis. The image of the universe as balanced in its centre appears both in the *Phaedo* and in the *Statesman*, where it is used as a model for autonomy and dominion over oneself, an ethically correct posture that enables self-determination.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is in prison, sentenced for impiety, and about to die. Trying to persuade his friends that death is no evil for a philosophical mind, he narrates a cosmic myth where immortal souls travel to different parts of the universe. Within this myth, he presents his own belief as to the position of the Earth in the cosmos:

I am persuaded, then – he said – that firstly, if the earth is in the centre (*en mesôi*) of the heavens and rounded, it needs (*dein*) neither the air nor any other constraint such as this in order not to fall, but that to hold it in place the equality (*homoiotçta*) the heavens to themselves and its own balance (*isorropian*) are sufficient; indeed, a balanced (*isorropon*) object placed in the centre of something that is equal (*homoïou*) cannot incline either

more or less in any direction, but it will remain equally unswerving. (*Phaed.* 108e-109a, tr. based on Reale).

Socrates chooses this image to contrast former cosmological theories, where the Earth is sustained by an external force, such as substrates of water or air that, like the mythical Titan Atlas, hold the universe from outside. For him, those philosophers who embrace this image,

[...] do not search for the force that causes things to be now placed as it is best for them to be placed, nor do they think it has any divine power (*ischun*), but they think they can find a new Atlas more powerful (*ischuroteron*) and more immortal than this, and they do not really think that what is good and right (*agathon kai deon*) binds together and embraces (*sundein kai sunechein*) all things. (*Phaed.* 99c, tr. based on Reale)

As opposed to former philosophical cosmologies, Socrates wants an image that shows “why it is best for [the Earth] to be in the centre (*en mesōi*)” (97e). As Jean-Pierre Vernant comments, since the Earth is “balanced at equal distance from everything”, it requires no external force or constraint “to abide where it is” (1985: 236, tr. mine). It is through its precise *right position* that it finds stability, and achieves what no mythical Titan or material element could: sustaining itself by itself. The position of the Earth in the centre of the cosmos, thus, represents for Socrates an ethical model, an enactment of a non-physical principle of goodness and correctness, *agathon kai deon*, which alone can bind together (*sun-dein*) the cosmos. *Deon* (correct, perfectly adequate, and sufficient) is what has the power to bind, *dein*, physical realities in a harmonious inner condition. It is an inherent power that bodies can exert autonomously, since it requires only a *right position*. Socrates thus indirectly compares his own position to that of the Earth, sustained by a cosmic principle of goodness, claiming that if his own “bones and sinews” are sitting in a cell, that is only because he “judged that it was more just and beautiful (*dikaioteron* [...] *kai kallion*), rather than to escape and run away, to sustain (*hupechein*) any penalty inflicted by the city” (*Phaed.* 99a). Socrates was in fact allowed to run away from Athens in exile, but his unswerving ethical persuasion is sufficient to keep him in the city that condemned him, and in the cell where he will die. Like the principle of goodness and correctness allows the Earth to sustain (*sun-echein*) itself, it allows Socrates to sustain (*hup-echein*) the punishment of the city and to turn it into an expression of his own intellectual freedom.

The same image of balance appears in the *Statesman*, where a character named ‘Eleatic Visitor’ uses it as a model for political action. Here, the cosmos is represented as revolving autonomously: “because, greatest (*megiston*) and most perfectly balanced (*isorropotaton*) as it is, it goes on travelling on the smallest pivot (*mikrotatou* [...] *podos*)” (*Pol.* 270a, tr. Rowe, adapted). But this autonomous movement cannot go on forever: periodically, the Visitor narrates, a god needs to stir the universe backwards, in order to prevent it from losing its movement in a ‘boundless sea of confusion (*anomoiotetos apeiron* [...] *ponton*)’ (273d-e; tr. mine [*anomoiotetos* is translated as

‘confusion’ rather than the more literal ‘dissimilarity’ or ‘unevenness’]). This bizarre image of an autonomy that can be lost and that depends on an external force (unlike the Earth in the *Phaedo*), is explained by Schuhl through the analogy with a spherical suspended spindle that probably influenced Plato’s myth:

The machine revolves, the string to which it is suspended is twisted; when the artisan [i.e. the god who crafted and directed it] steps aside, the string, quite naturally, tends to untwist; at first, the movement continues without interruption, and then, after a moment of turmoil, when the two impulses oppose each other (272e-273a), ‘its allotted and innate drive turned it back again in the opposite direction’. (1968: 84).

In a sense, the action of the god creates an impulse in the universe that, periodically, can unfold on its own in the opposite direction, precisely thanks to the convergence of forces in its central axis. But Schuhl’s image is merely an analogy: the *Statesman* does not portray any axial string, but rather a central pivot of balance, where the enormous (*megiston*), revolving mass of the cosmos finds its balanced tension on its minuscule (*mikrotaton*), stable pivot. Plato’s universe is not a mere machine, but a living being endowed with wisdom (*phronesis*, 269d) and desire (*epithumia*, 272e). It is also not mechanically suspended to a binding string, but can potentially get lost in an unbound, infinite (*apeiron*) external space. In this image, the essential ethical model is one of *acquired* autonomy, where the control of an external power exists only in function of the independent (if precarious) self-movement of its subject. The delicate convergence of opposite instances (the huge cosmic size, and its minuscule pivot; the timely control of a steersman and the balanced autonomy of a revolving cosmos) is in the *Statesman* a model for an ethical ideal of right measure. Ethically and politically just is, here, everything that conforms to “due measure (*metrion*), what is fitting (*prepon*), the right moment (*kairon*), what is as it ought to be (*deon*), and everything that *removes itself from the extremes to the middle* (*meson*)” (284e, tr. Rowe, adapted).

The convergence of balance in a cosmic middle point represents, such as in the *Phaedo*, the universal enactment of a principle named, among other terms, *deon*: that which can bind (*dein*) things together, that which is needed to make things as they ought to be; not an external duty, but an interior position that can maintain reality in its most harmonious, balanced, and classically beautiful condition. We can briefly notice that similar images of delicate equipoise, explicitly used as images for the soul, appear also in the *Republic* and the *Laws*: in the former (436c-e), the human interiority, composed of divergent impulses, is compared to a spinning-top, which can be said to stand still (on its axis) and at the same time to move (in its circumference), as long as its axis does not incline (*apoklinein*); in the latter (898a-c), the intellectual and cosmic soul is compared to a “sphere turned with the lathe (*sphaira entornou*)”, able to remain constantly equal through change, if it revolves “always around some centre (*meson*)”. The physical *meson* and equipoise are to Plato ethical and psychological images of unwavering but delicate stability. Plato’s ethical ideal is, accordingly, one of internal harmony and delicate self-control, to be found and acquired within one’s own position.

4. Nietzsche: Philosophical Stillness and Revolution of Values

Nietzsche is the philosopher who defined contemporary nihilism, as a state of radical disorientation of opinions and values, and attempted to overcome it. Writing in the second half of the 19th century, Nietzsche saw the decadence of traditional Christian values, and the emergence of alternative, conflicting moral and intellectual systems that, in his view, substituted the ideal of God with other metaphysical principles (e.g. the State, Man, Idealism, Materialism; cf. *The Gay Science*, 108 and 109). He used a wide plethora of allegorical or metaphorical images to convey his conception, in the persuasion that traditional language, heavy with metaphysical presuppositions, should be dismantled in order to pave the way to a post-metaphysical and not nihilistic philosophy. Noticeably, since his youth Nietzsche had defined his philosophy as an “inverted Platonism” (“Posthumous Fragments” 1870/71, 7[156]; cf. Figal 2002, p.102), an attempt to value the world of appearances more than the hypothetical world of true essences; so it does not surprise to find in Nietzsche the same mythical creations we see in Plato, but overturned in focus. As Hans Blumenberg observed, “after Plato [...] only Nietzsche tried to devise elementary myths [...] and employed them as an instrument of philosophy” (1979, p.176); Nietzsche did this, I submit, because he needed to subvert the Platonic imagery as well as the theory (cf. Andler 1921, pp.165-166). Nietzsche’s most famous cosmic image of nihilism is the ‘eternal return of the same’, representing the radical immanence of universe where all its history is cyclically repeated, forever, without any external points of reference to give it meaning. However, he represented nihilism through other mythical images. He used the images of the cosmic order, celestial revolutions, and the loss of a universal centre as symbols for the advent of nihilism, and for his own creative response to it. Since he writes in fragmented aphorisms, it is always useful to examine his works in a comparative manner: I suggest here a comparison of the famous allegory ‘The Madman’ (125) in the *Gay Science* to the less known aphorism ‘Great Events’ (40) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

‘The Madman’ represents the nihilistic loss of values as a cosmic disorientation and loss of centre. In the story, a madman irrupts in a marketplace shouting that God is dead, and is derided by the non-believers there convened. While they, despite being atheists themselves, do not accept the tremendous consequences of God’s death, the madman tries to show them with a cosmic image: “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing?” (181).

The death of God is, to the madman, a radical *loss of centre*, because it entails the dissolution of all absolute and permanent values that can orientate and keep together the order of reality. The state of humanity after the loss of ideals, then, is one of radical *loss of direction*, a “breakdown of previously accepted values”, which forces humanity “into ‘unexplored’ and ‘undiscovered’ territory” (Löwith 1965, p.312). Without a centre, there is no possibility to determine a direction towards which we, as humans, are moving, or to evaluate ups and downs, i.e. to determine objectives and an order of

higher and lower values. The parallelism with Platonic imagery is stunning: the cosmic movement becomes, in the absence of a stable centre and a binding force, a pure straying into an infinite disorienting space. The “infinite nothing” of nihilism is therefore not a pure absence, but the absence of orientation, much like in Plato’s infinite sea of confusion. Like in Plato, ‘unbound’ and ‘infinite’ are synonyms: in absence of a binding centre, there are no de-terminations, no boundaries, and possibilities are as unlimited as confusing. Unlike in Plato, though, there is no benevolent god who providentially prevents the loss of centre; cosmic disorientation is total and definitive. Nietzsche, here, provides no answer to this dramatic state. He rather represents this vision of cosmic disorientation as out of reach for the people in the market-place: “This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering – it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard” (182).

There is no answer because the madman’s message is untimely: “I have come too early”, he judges, symbolically smashing the lantern he was displaying in full daylight. While the story in fact calls for the “invention” of new “festivals of atonement” after the death of God, it leaves open the question of how to react to “the greatness of this deed”, because it is still “too great for us” (181). There can be no answer to the state of disorientation entailed by the loss of values, if it is not seen as such.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we find more direct answers to this problem of disorientation, which is ultimately a problem of valuation. For instance, in the aphorism ‘On a Thousand and One Goals’ (15), Nietzsche establishes the inherent variety of possible human values, outside any stable system, and he claims: “Evaluation is creation: hear it, you creative men! Valuating is itself the treasure and the jewel of the valued things. Only through evaluation is there value; and without evaluation the nut of existence would be hollow” (p.85). Again, we find the problem of values in relation to the core of reality: *creating* values is what fills the void at the core of an unbound existence. The best human reply to the void of existence is not a search for truth, but a creation of new valuable appearances (cf. Andler 1921: 247-248). Nietzsche does not counteract disorientation with a reactionary return to an imaginary centre; he rather radicalises the loss of values, claiming that values themselves are nothing but human creations. His positive reaction to disorientation, consistently, is a call to renewed ethical creativity.

This appeal to a new, creative core of reality is imagined again as a matter of cosmic order in the 40th aphorism of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, titled ‘Great Events’. Here, Nietzsche employs the images of cosmic revolutions and of the centre of the Earth to represent the quiet action of the creators of new values, i.e. those philosophical individuals who can bring about an overthrowing of traditional, transcendent values, and substitute them with an ongoing, philosophical effort of evaluation of our immanent world. ‘Great Events’ is the narration of one of Zarathustra’s, philosopher and explorer, voyages at sea. It is a fantastical narrative divided in three sub-sections: first, Zarathustra arrives at a volcanic island with his sailors, who see him flying past their ship like a ghost and shouting the enigmatic message: “It is high time”. Second,

Zarathustra encounters a demonic fire-dog, who is believed to surge right out of the heart of the Earth, i.e. straight from the core of things, and opposes to him his own vision of a cosmic centre. Third, he returns to the ship, where the sailors ignore his account of what happened on the island, and he reflects on the ghost and his message. The story ends with an enigma: “For what, then, is it — high time?” (Burnham and Jesinghausen 2010: 115). The two external moments of the narration thus frame, enigmatically, the central passage, in which we find the image of cosmic centrality and revolutions.

Zarathustra and the demonic fire-dog represent two opposing conceptions about the core of reality. The fire-dog is accused by Zarathustra of being a “ventriloquist of the earth”, who pretends to speak “out of the heart of things”; he sprites of out the depths, but his appearance surrounded by fire and smoke is just the mask of a shallow superficiality. Zarathustra compares the fire-dog to the Church and the state, i.e. to mendacious and shallow institutions, which appeal to a metaphysical authority they do not have. To the dog’s appearance as a creature from the core of reality, Zarathustra opposes his disbelief: “I have unlearned belief in “great events”, whenever there is much bellowing and smoke about them. [...] The greatest events — they are not our noisiest but our stillest hours. The world revolves, not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values; it revolves *inaudibly*” (153-154).

In this passage, Nietzsche contrasts the image of a demonic creature with that of a creator of values; the fire-dog is a roaring, loud creature, which speaks with the authority of one who comes from the centre of reality. But the true centre, to Zarathustra, is the very creative individual. There is, he claims, a real dog of the depths, who does not breathe fire and smoke, but “his breath exhales gold and golden rain”, because “the heart of the earth is of gold”. Zarathustra’s appeal to a different, golden, and delicate centre of things humiliates the fire-dog, who finally runs back to his cave.

Setting aside other important elements of this image, like the gold, the masking smoke, or the false depths, I wish to focus on the image of the creator of values as the silent centre of a cosmic revolution. While the state-like dog is surrounded by loud noises and thick smoke, not unlike the loud declarations and proud symbols of ‘metaphysical’ institutions, Zarathustra appeals to a quiet, disillusioned but creative individualism. The Hegelian idealistic view of the state as “the march of God in the world”, and as “an absolute and unmoved end in itself” (*Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 258) is overturned here: there is no metaphysical heart of the Earth, of which someone could bear the message or enact the will. There is, instead, a position of centrality to be assumed by creative subjects, who alone can give value to the revolutions that surround them. Charles Andler correctly observed that Nietzsche’s appreciation of creative individuals constitutes “the immobile centre of all the shifting system of [his] ideas” (1921: 248). The revolution, just like the overturning of values, is centred on the creative subject; it is not visualised as a destructive or forceful action, but as a silent, imperceptible movement. The point of convergence with Nietzsche’s story ‘The Madman’ are remarkable: (a) the revolution, the radical subversion of accepted values, goes unseen and unheard; (b) the decentred movement of the

Earth calls for a creative act that is not understood by those who do not see its necessity; (c) the “great deed” of the loss of a cosmic centre requires the even greater event of an individual capable to become a new centre; (d) the untimeliness of the madman’s message is echoed by Zarathustra’s ghost’s announce of a “high time”, and by Zarathustra’s description of the “stillest hours” as the moment for creative valuation. In the figure of the creator of values as the new centre we do not find, then, a forceful re-establishment of metaphysical centrality. We rather see the central point of view around which we can visualise a new order of values, even if its necessity is yet unseen and unheard. The greatest events coincide with “our stillest hours” (cf. *Zarathustra* 44), and the revolutions of the world are centred on silent, creative individuals. Zarathustra’s ghost asked: “For what then – is it high time?” It is time for the subversion to be made visible and audible, for a change of perception that eschews ostentatious appeals to the core of reality, but rather requires the subject to assume, *personally*, a position of centrality.

This image of creative centrality is fundamental to complete Nietzsche’s stance on the a-centred human condition after the nihilistic loss of directions. It expresses the paradoxical position of the creator of new values, depending at the same time on the dramatic loss of an *objective* cosmic centre, and on the stillness of a *subjective* point that, alone, can actualise an authentic revolution of values. This image overturns the Platonic one: Nietzsche does not refer the revolutions of values and opinions back to a stable centre; rather, he relates the centre directly to the revolutions that surround it. However stable, the centre is the foundation of a subversion. Its stillness is not the quietness of an objective presence; instead, it is the subjective point of view that *makes* the revolution real, that *creates* it.

Unlike Plato, Nietzsche does not call for the *discovery* of a centre of balance (a subjective position that depends on an objective structure), but for the personal *transformation* into the centre of a change. His centre is not the point of self-equality, but of self-transcendence. Indeed, *only* in respect to such centrality it becomes possible to orientate, with Nietzsche, the nihilistic dispersion within a cosmic, self-transcending succession of different moments of the day. Frequently does Nietzsche use imagery of cosmic succession in this way: the *twilight* of idols is the disappearance of former ideals; *midnight* is the radical loss of ideals, a wholly negative moment when no orientation seems possible; *daybreak* is the emergence of new values, as affirmative creations instead of false absolutes; and *midday* is the moment of joyous immanence in the world, when shadows are short and no transcendent illusions hinder the affirmation of corporeal life (cf. Nietzsche’s books: *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*; and *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices on Morality*. For the images of: night: *Gay Science* [125]; dawn: *Zarathustra* [48]; midday: *Twilight* [1]). The entire process originated by nihilism, then, can be seen *affirmatively* as a cosmic revolution, where partial values are cyclically affirmed and destroyed. Nietzsche’s *affirmative* position overcomes nihilism by embracing the disoriented world, as a condition for the creation of values. The position of affirmative centrality has been called by Gilles Deleuze “the focal point”, where “nihilism is defeated, but

defeated by itself”, because finding this point entails “not a change of values, but a change of the element from which the value of values derives. Appreciation instead of depreciation [...] will as affirmative will” (1983: 172-174). In this sense, the centre requires, *as centre*, a constant overcoming of partial points of view. Despite overturning Plato’s imagery, Nietzsche maintains centrality as the difficult, and even paradoxical, subjective reply to a troubling sea of unbound possibilities.

5. Kundera: Cosmic Polarity and Central Vertigo

Like Plato and Nietzsche, Milan Kundera unifies narrations, images, and philosophy. His most famous novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is an example of philosophical insights joined to an historical narration, set during the Prague Spring (1968) and the following two decades. Published in 1984, this novel is an evident critique of the Second World War, and of the Stalinist regime that followed it. Less evidently, it is also a reflection on the dispersion of conflicting values during and after the war, as opposed to a philosophical questioning attitude: while “political [totalitarian] movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on [...] fantasies, images, words, and archetypes” (250), this irrationality is contrasted by “the person who asks questions” (247), i.e. by those who do not uncritically accept superficial images, but demand explanation. Kundera’s concern is not so much with dispersion as such, but with the irrational channelling of this dispersion in polarised movements (left and right) that mask the very dispersion through delusionary images. However, he pursues his critique also through myths and images, and he frames the whole narration within Nietzsche’s “mad myth” (3) of eternal return: “the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing” (3).

Kundera thus evaluates the Nietzschean myth as an expression of outright nihilism about human endeavours, and he uses it to criticise in particular the vanity of wars and revolutions. It is a “perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature” (4). Even if any historical act, such as, for instance, Robespierre’s revolution or a medieval African war, ultimately means nothing, its eternal recurrence makes it heavy, it makes “its inanity irreparable” (3), and any mitigation or justification based on the future becomes impossible. Nietzsche’s myth means that every historical act bears the heaviness of unescapable responsibility, since it will never be resolved in a result other than itself. Every act is existentially heavy precisely insofar as it is historically insignificant, or ‘light’. Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, then, becomes the point of coincidence of lightness and heaviness.

Kundera declines this coincidence through many different ‘mythical’ images, from the dualism of being and non-being (5), to that of body and soul (37), and even of words and meaning (85). But only in the penultimate chapter of the story, “The Grand March”, we find it transformed into a cosmic image, where the two poles of the Earth converge in a single point, and cause a dreadful vertigo. We see it in the tragic example of Stalin’s son, Yakov, who (in Kundera’s imaginary account) was captured by the

Germans, was humiliated by other prisoners because he “habitually left a foul mess” in the shared latrine, and finally committed suicide out of humiliation. From Yakov’s humiliation Kundera extracts the image of a cosmic vertigo:

Was he, who bore on his shoulders a drama of the highest order (as fallen angel *and* Son of God), to undergo judgment not for something sublime (in the realm of God and the angels), but for shit? Were the very highest of drama and the very lowest so vertiginously close? Vertiginously close? Can proximity cause vertigo? It can. When the north pole comes so close as to touch the south pole, the earth disappears and man finds himself in a void that makes his head spin and beckons him to fall” (238).

While Nietzsche presented the nihilistic disorientation as a cosmic space with no centre, up, and down, Kundera makes it a vertiginous space where up and down, north and south, converge and meet in the middle. In Kundera’s image, it is not the Sun that disappears, but the very Earth itself. All space, defined by opposite extremes, is annihilated when the extremes fall upon each other. The apparent importance of Yakov’s political drama, the godlike privilege of Stalin who had rejected him, collapses on the opposite, trivial but concrete humiliation caused by his bodily excrements. His Atlas-like position, as a divinity who ‘bore on his shoulders’ the ‘highest drama’ of politics, collapses on the ‘lowest’ drama of a prisoner’s humiliation. The Classical echo of this language is implicit, possibly a mere dead metaphor (as in expressions like ‘institutional body’). It is nonetheless significant that the image has re-emerged intact in the same cosmic context. The figure of Yakov as Atlas, here, is that of a godlike being crushed not merely by cosmic grandeur, but by its constant shift with humiliating events: “Rejection and privilege, happiness and woe – no one felt more concretely than Yakov how interchangeable opposites are” (238).

Kundera contrasts Yakov’s heartfelt suicide to the meaningless sacrifices of German and Russian soldiers in the war, presenting it at the “sole metaphysical death”. Yakov’s death represents a metaphysical issue, because it symbolises a nihilistic vertigo of the sort Nietzsche described. This vertigo, however, is not caused by decentred directions, but by an inherent confusion that befalls on a single subject; it is the impossibility to distinguish highest and lowest not because a centre is absent, but because those extremes have fallen too close to their centre.

Kundera’s cosmic image disposes of the centre, in the same move through which it makes the polar extremes converge in that very centre. It is therefore radically negative. Kundera’s disorientation, unlike Plato’s and Nietzsche’s, is not one of a cosmic body within an external space, but one caused by the internal convergence of its very limits, which annihilates the body itself. Kundera does not allow any opposites (balance or unbalance; external and internal space) to remain distinct. In this way, he tragically disavows any possibility for a moderate centre: the very existence of polar extremities (north and south, lightness and heaviness, fidelity and infidelity, privilege and excrements) causes a radical, *inherent* indecisiveness, because the poles are indistinguishable. Disorientation thus becomes an *internal* condition of the subject, not an external confusion.

However, this condition is valuable. The collapse of poles on the annihilated centre assumes a positive value as a breaking point of self-awareness, in contrast to the blind war-like opposition of enemy factions: “The Germans who sacrificed their lives to expand their county’s territory to the east, the Russians who died to extend their country’s power to the west – yes, they died for something idiotic, and their deaths have no meaning or general validity” (238).

Kundera contrasts the outward, expansionistic opposition of geo-political east and west with the inward collapse of physical north and south. The collapse of polarity on the centre is certainly a painful condition, and it can end in self-sacrifice; but it is inherently much more valuable, much more meaningful, than the vain effort of war, a pointless contrast of opposite factions that cannot converge, but only tear each other apart. If war, as contrast of polar opposites, is to Kundera pure idiocy, Yakov’s suicidal choice is “metaphysical” because it is endowed with philosophical significance. Imprisoned in a condition of total weakness, Yakov exposes, through his humiliation, the inherently acentric status of human beings when they lose their affiliation to one or another pole of human existence. His death is a moment of authenticity, the unhindered expression of a philosophical acknowledgment: poles are close to each other, opposites are interchangeable, and the (often violent) effort of setting them apart is a vain delusion. This is the only contrast that Kundera allows: meaninglessness, vanity, and idiocy against meaning, value, and self-awareness. Kundera’s collapsed centre is a crushing self-awareness that cannot be constrained by the vanity of opposing, separate poles: as such, it is again a moment of philosophical freedom. Not the freedom of a choice between opposite alternatives, but the freedom to manifest the heavy absurdity of their lightweight shifting.

6. Conclusion: centrality as threefold model of philosophical freedom

A common philosophical concern for freedom among adverse circumstances associates Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera, despite their mutual distance in time; thus, it is not a chance that they chose the same cosmic myth to express such a concern. While certainly Plato influenced Nietzsche, who strived to overturn Platonism, and Nietzsche influenced Kundera, who appropriated his imagery, the historical connections among these authors are merely a contingent precondition of their shared philosophical concerns. The fact that they all chose images of cosmic centrality is, more than a piece of philological evidence, a testimony to the ongoing power of imagery to orient philosophical awareness. Images remain present within language that has become ordinary, such as in dead metaphors like ‘concentrating’ or ‘balancing act’ (cf. Black 1962 and Ricoeur 1975), and bringing them back to the surface increases our awareness of how language influences the way we think.

The comparative study of these three images of centrality highlights three different ways of conceiving the centre amidst dispersive directions. ‘Centre’ can be a position where opposites are balanced, an objective point to be found through the delicate coordination of diverging qualities (big and small, stability and movement, freedom and imprisonment). It can be, therefore, a model of autonomy, as the mutual ‘keeping together’ of these qualities, without need for an external support or constraint.

Differently, it can be the position where orientation amidst diverging directions is possible, as a subjective point of view that can keep them together. It can be, thus, a model of creative valuation, oriented not towards itself but towards an ongoing overcoming of partial truths, opinions, and values. Finally, it can also be a fading position between opposite directions, which cannot be kept separate. Therefore, it can be a subjective point of radical refusal of divergence, a purely subjective self-awareness that becomes the source of meaning and value by denying any violent opposition. In all cases, the centre is an internalised space in opposition to an external ambivalent field: only with regard to the internal centre the two external phenomena of disorientation (where movement lacks any direction) and constriction (where one direction of movement precludes any other) are possible. Deleuze’s and Derrida’s binary opposition of acentric rhizome v. axial tree, or acentric free-play v. centralised structure, are therefore misleadingly partial, since they do not consider that the structure of the centre is actually threefold: the centre can be opposed either to unbound multiple directions or to constraining determinations, both of which hinder its autonomous self-direction. The centre is always the locus of a self-aware autonomy, because it stands in opposition to extremes where self-direction becomes impossible.

Can we use these images to respond to the contemporary phenomenon of decentred information? I wish to submit a humble and partial proposal for a reflection on images of the centre as possible models to understand this phenomenon. As I have briefly shown, decentred information characterises contemporary life from politics to hypertexts. Nowadays we face political forces that pull away from centralised ideals, such as the European Union, and that promote division, such as the construction of walls at national boundaries and the rejection of war refugees. But these pulls are not merely ‘political’, in the sense of a purely collective phenomenon that transcends and determines, from above, individual positions. Rather, they are correlative to a subjective and inter-subjective problem of decentred orientation: partisanship and unreflective particularisms are related to the current problems of technological participation and shared knowledge, which can degenerate into disorienting fragmentation and filtered information. Freedom and knowledge, here, are hindered not through direct and evident constriction, but through a dispersion that confines each particular opinion within a limited space. I am not arguing that there is a direct causal relation between this decentred, but channelled and fragmented, information, and political divisive decisions. The correlation is, in fact, more profound; it is a structural homogeneity whereby any subjective attention to an all-encompassing, ‘centred’ organisation is hindered, while dispersion and particularisation are constantly increasing. The maintenance of a subjective centre can be hindered, according to the models outlined above, both by the external divergence of directions (dispersion), and by the external determination of such directions (particularisation). Neither constraint is immediately evident as such, since it appears either as an unbound possibility of choice, or as a freely accepted field in opposition to other, rejected possibilities. The response to this state of things cannot be a reactive return to a transcendent centrality, to an overarching project imposed from above, precisely because any claim to this central and superior position

is itself suspect of partiality, and could become another external constraint. Instead, a correct and active response needs to acknowledge the lower, decentred position of these contemporary phenomena, and move on from there. The response must not be an immediately political one, but a subjective one of correct ethical positioning.

The images I have examined as models of decentred forces and centred orientation move in this direction. They do not suggest the imposition of a pattern from above, but the coordination of different instances within the position of the subject. I propose these three images of centrality as responses, from different angles, to the problem of decentred conditions of knowledge and ethical behaviours. Plato's balance is an effective model if the problem is that of instituting a centralised organisation (be it individual or collective), whenever it is threatened by divergent drives, without recurring to imposition from above but trying to find an immanent organisation of coexistence. Nietzsche's stillness is significant as a creative response to the radical absence of any acknowledged centre; a response that rejects stiffened opinions and absolutes, but embraces their partiality as a condition for further creativity. Kundera's vertigo is significant whenever the phenomenon of dispersion becomes a problem of polarisation, i.e. when inner meaningful drives are channelled by outward forces in futile contrasting movements. The acceptance of inner disorientation thus becomes itself a model for autonomous orientation. Each author here examined treats the problem of dispersion as an ethical issue, and offers different contextual responses. It is not my purpose, in this article, to promote an ethical argument, let alone a political one, but merely to show that the issue of decentred information is *also* an ethical problem. It is a problem that concerns the position of the subject amidst this dispersive space. Different responses are possible, and they are a matter of subjective choice. Orientation within this problem is nonetheless necessary and Plato, Nietzsche, and Kundera provide us with instruments to achieve it. I believe that their different images allow us, as Cusinato suggests, to "imagine a form of orientation that does not coincide with repression" (2013: 39). The judgment of their validity and effectiveness must be left, by necessity, to the reader.

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