

2

2021

Filozofski vestnik

Filozofski vestnik

THE CONCEPT OF WORLD  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHY

Edited by  
Rok Benčin

Založba ZRC



ISSN 0353 4510  
Letnik/Volume XLII  
Številka/Number 2  
Ljubljana 2021

# Filozofski vestnik

ISSN 0353-4510

## Programska zasnova

Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) je glasilo Filozofskega inštituta Znanstveno-raziskovalnega centra Slovenske akademije znanosti in umetnosti. Filozofski vestnik je znanstveni časopis za filozofijo z interdisciplinarno in mednarodno usmeritvijo in je forum za diskusijo o širokem spektru vprašanj s področja sodobne filozofije, etike, estetike, politične, pravne filozofije, filozofije jezika, filozofije zgodovine in zgodovine politične misli, epistemologije in filozofije znanosti, zgodovine filozofije in teoretske psihoanalize. Odprt je za različne filozofske usmeritve, stile in šole ter spodbuja teoretski dialog med njimi.

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Filozofski vestnik je vključen v: Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Current Contents / Arts & Humanities, EBSCO, IBZ (Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriften), The Philosopher's Index, Répertoire bibliographique de philosophie, Scopus in Sociological Abstracts.

Izid revije je finančno podprla Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije. Filozofski vestnik je ustanovila Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti.

## Aims and Scope

*Filozofski vestnik (ISSN 0353-4510) is edited and published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Filozofski vestnik is a philosophy journal with an interdisciplinary character. It provides a forum for discussion on a wide range of issues in contemporary political philosophy, history of philosophy, history of political thought, philosophy of law, social philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of science, cultural critique, ethics, and aesthetics. The journal is open to different philosophical orientations, styles and schools, and welcomes theoretical dialogue among them.*

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*Filozofski vestnik is published with the support of the Slovenian Research Agency. Filozofski vestnik was founded by the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.*

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ISSN 0353-4510

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Revija izhaja trikrat letno. | *The journal is published three times annually.*

Letna naročnina: 21 €. Letna naročnina za študente in dijake: 12,50 €.

Cena posamezne številke: 10 €. | *Annual subscription: €21 for individuals, €40  
for institutions. Single issues: €10 for individuals, €20 for institutions. Back issues  
are available.*

## Naročila sprejema

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p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana  
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Oblikovanje | *Design*: Pekinpah  
Tisk | *Printed by*: Cicero Begunje  
Naklada | *Print run*: 380

Rok Benčin\*

## Introduction: The World According to Contemporary Philosophy

The emergence of modern philosophy coincides with the problematisation of the concept of world. In his famous study of the modern scientific and philosophical revolution that took place in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century European thought, Alexandre Koyré argued that this revolution “can be described roughly as bringing forth the destruction of the Cosmos, that is, the disappearance, from philosophically and scientifically valid concepts, of the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole.”<sup>1</sup> But what became of the philosophical concept of world when it could no longer be identified with a mythical, metaphysical, or cosmological totality? It could be claimed that the dissolution of the cosmos actually marks the emergence of the concept of world as a modern philosophical problem. This special issue of *Filozofski vestnik* presents a collection of essays dedicated to the persistence of this problem in contemporary philosophy.

In this short introduction to the issue, I propose a categorisation of three different ways in which contemporary philosophy has reacted to the modern destruction of the cosmos. Three strands of thought can be detected, each identifying a different “destiny” of the concept of world within modernity:

- (1) The first tendency generalises Koyré’s conclusion by rejecting the concept of world as an *obsolete* metaphysical category that is no longer viable in the modern age.
- (2) The second tendency claims that the modern dissolution of the cosmos also brought forth the *loss* of the world as a framework of commonly shared experience and reflects on the possibility of rebuilding it.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957, p. 2.

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- (3) The third tendency argues that the dissolution of a cosmic totality resulted not in a loss, but instead in a *proliferation* of singular, divergent, yet coexisting worlds.

It should be noted that the distinction between these tendencies can only be made analytically, since they are actually deeply intertwined and often coexist within the work of one and the same philosopher. In what follows, I first briefly sketch these three tendencies and then proceed to describe the essays collected in this issue.

- (1) From the point of view of the first tendency, world should no longer be considered a valid philosophical concept. Inspired by Koyré, Jacques Lacan argued that science clearly shows that the nature of physical reality does not constitute what philosophers have called world: “If we leave behind philosophical discourse, nothing is less certain than the existence of a world.”<sup>2</sup> This claim has often been reiterated by Lacan-influenced philosophers, most notably Slavoj Žižek, who emphasise – from a materialist position – the ontological incompleteness of reality: “The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist – in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole.”<sup>3</sup> Even Alain Badiou, ten years before developing his own concept of world, claimed that “philosophy begins by destroying the very concept of the world; it knows, as does Lacan, that there only is a fantasy of the world, and that it is only in its defection, or its defeat, that one can subtractively think some real.”<sup>4</sup> It is thus possible to claim, from a materialist or realist position, that “the world” does not exist. The new realist currents in philosophy either simply equate the notion of world with objectivity or reject it as the metaphysical totality to which nothing corresponds in reality. The latter position is endorsed by Markus Gabriel, according to whom the world as a totality is an illegitimate construction of the paradoxical domain of all domains.<sup>5</sup> Roland Végső recently went a step further and showed how a strug-

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, New York, W. W. Norton, 1998, p. 30. (See also p. 33.)

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> See the text “Logology Against Ontology” in Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, B. Bosteels (ed.), London, Verso, 2012, p. 317.

<sup>5</sup> Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, trans. G. Moss, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.

gle with worldlessness was even at the heart of those philosophies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that nevertheless attempted to revive and reconfigure the concept of world.<sup>6</sup> Végső proposes that such attempts should instead be abandoned in favour of an affirmative exploration of worldlessness.

- (2) The concept of world made a significant comeback as a category of phenomenological experience starting with Edmund Husserl's and then Martin Heidegger's theories of the surrounding world, the life world, the being-in-the-world, etc. In this tradition of thought, world is not simply a descriptive notion, but also constitutes an endangered ideal of the authentic existential experience, significantly threatened by modern ways of life and thought influenced by science and technology. For Heidegger, for instance, modernity brought about the "darkening of the world," in which humankind's world-building capacity is at stake.<sup>7</sup> While, from the cosmological perspective, world is obsolete as a concept, from the phenomenological perspective, it is always on the verge of being lost as a form of experience. Inspired by this phenomenological perspective, Hannah Arendt presented a similar take on the loss of the world in social terms, identifying modernity with humankind's alienation from the world, which has occurred thanks not only to modern science but also the capitalist mode of production.<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy continued this trend by claiming that "there is no longer any world" in which "one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation."<sup>9</sup> In his final seminar, Jacques Derrida similarly discussed the phenomenological concept of world by questioning the very possibility of shareable experience.<sup>10</sup> In Gilles Deleuze, we find the idea that modernity testifies to the "broken link between man and world."<sup>11</sup> Finally, at a certain point, even Badiou claims that our historical situation, given the depoliticisation operat-

<sup>6</sup> Roland Végső, *Worldlessness After Heidegger: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried and R. Polt, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett, Minneapolis and London, The University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign: Volume II*, trans. G. Bennington, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 169.

ed by contemporary “capital-parlamentarism,” does not constitute a world.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, this trend seems to leave open the possibility of regaining the world, of re-establishing a genuine link to or belief therein. Yet, a more apocalyptic version is indeed also present. The climate crisis puts the loss of the world into an even more urgent perspective, while also compelling us to rethink the relation between earth and world.<sup>13</sup>

- (3) The third tendency claims that our contemporary experience of reality is marked by the coexistence of a multiplicity of worlds. Genealogically, this perspective entails a return to Leibniz, for whom worlds are different possible configurations of the same ontological multiplicity (the multiplicity of monads). Monads can be arranged in different ways so as to constitute an infinite number of possible worlds. While Leibniz confined the multiplicity of worlds to possibility (only one of all possible worlds was ultimately created), some contemporary philosophers have argued instead that our own reality is actually constituted as a multiplicity of divergent, yet overlapping, worlds. For Deleuze, the “impossibilities” that Leibniz distributed between different possible worlds erupt “onto the same stage,” constituting a “chaosmos” where “impossible worlds belong to the same universe.”<sup>14</sup> Badiou, on the other hand, attempts to separate the logical order of worlds from the chaotic multiplicity found on the ontological level: “[H]ow can the essential unbinding of multiple-being give itself as a local binding and, in the end, as the stability of worlds? Why and how are there worlds rather than chaos?”<sup>15</sup> Yet, this declared stability is nevertheless put into question when we consider the coexistence of a multiplicity of worlds: “Not only is there a

<sup>12</sup> See the text “The Caesura of Nihilism” in Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, pp. 61–64.

<sup>13</sup> See Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015; Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. R. Nunes, Cambridge, Polity, 2017; M. S. C. Schuback and S. Lindberg (eds.), *The End of the World: Contemporary Philosophy and Art*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017; Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens, and Gauthier Chapelle, *Another End of the World is Possible: Living the Collapse (and Not Merely Surviving It)*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel, Cambridge, Polity, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, T. Conley, London, The Athlone Press, 1993, pp. 81–82. See also Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, Alain, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event*, 2, trans. A. Toscano, London, Continuum, 2006, p. 101.

plurality of worlds, but the same multiple – the ‘same’ ontologically – in general co-belongs to different worlds.”<sup>16</sup> Contrary to Leibniz, who subordinates the infinity of worlds to the best one, Badiou claims that human beings are capable of inhabiting a “virtually unlimited number of worlds.”<sup>17</sup> Within the phenomenological tradition, Nancy has argued that the loss of the world as totality allows us to become attentive to the true sense of the world, in which its plurality is revealed: “The world is always the plurality of worlds.”<sup>18</sup> The Leibnizian concept of possible worlds also had a significant impact in analytic philosophy through its usage in modal logics. The logical discussions also spawned a metaphysical debate on the actual existence of these other worlds. While David Lewis famously argued that other possible worlds, separate from our own, actually exist, Nelson Goodman claimed that *our own* world is always already constituted as a multiplicity of actual worlds.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, this brief schematic overview leaves aside many important differences between the thinkers and concepts it puts together. What exactly “world” refers to in the work of different philosophers and philosophical traditions should of course be carefully analysed.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the more general tendencies revealed by this view from afar might nevertheless point us in the direction of some common questions and problems addressed by these different conceptualisations.

Further analysis would also have to show how these concepts respond to scientific, social, political, and artistic developments. We have opened this introduction with the major impact the emergence of modern science had on the philo-

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> See David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986; and Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that there are a significant number of studies on the concept of world in individual authors and philosophical traditions, systematic examinations and comparative readings of different approaches in contemporary philosophy are relatively rare. Such studies include (apart from those I mention in other parts of the text) Paul Clavier, *Le concept du monde*, Paris, PUF, 2000; Christian Bernier, *Qu'est-ce qu'une conception du monde?*, Paris, Vrin, 2006; Jean-Clet Martin, *Plurivers: Essai sur la fin du monde*, Paris, PUF, 2010; Sean Gaston, *The Concept of World from Kant to Derrida*, London and New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2013; Julien Rabachou, *Qu'est-ce qu'un monde?*, Paris, Vrin, 2016; Franck Fischbach, *La privation de monde: Temps, espace et capital*, Paris, Vrin, 2019.



sophical concept of world. To this, we should add the rise of capitalism, which, as Karl Marx already noted, resulted in the world market. Capitalism recreates – but also immediately alienates – the world as a (socio-economic) totality. It is also the general framework within which the growing ideological polarisation, coupled with increasing socio-economic inequalities, today contributes to the deepening experience of living in different worlds. Philosophical readings of artworks should also be mentioned in this regard. Artworks have the capacity to open up new worlds by reframing the coordinates of sensible experience. Consider, for example, Deleuze’s assertion that artworks determine the conditions of *real* experience in contrast to the Kantian limits of *possible* experience.<sup>21</sup> In turn, fictional structures, similar to those at work in art and literature, can also be detected, as Jacques Rancière – among others – has repeatedly shown, in the way the political experience of common worlds is constructed.<sup>22</sup>

The first two texts in this issue themselves offer an extended introduction to world as a philosophical concept. Bruno Besana reflects on its “pre-history” through a detailed reading of Plato and Aristotle, offering an account of how the modern concept of world arises precisely from the incompleteness of the cosmos that ancient Greek philosophy constantly stumbled upon. The indeterminacy of the concept, its “essential equivocality,” is also – according to Besana – what has made it so productive throughout the history of philosophy. Peter Klepec further explores the many difficulties and contradictions related to this elusive concept in the context of contemporary philosophy, focusing specifically on the way the world is supposed to be changed (beyond philosophy, as in Marx) or recreated (with philosophy, as in Badiou).

A series of articles then addresses the knot of obsolescence and loss that surrounds the concept of world. Roland Végső proposes to understand contemporary cultural disorientation not as resulting from a lack but instead from a surplus of world. In an intriguing use of the Goethean categories of *Weltschmerz* and *Weltliteratur*, Végső’s article outlines an objective *Weltschmerz* through which the world becomes aware of its own inexistence while an abundance of

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<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, London, Continuum, 1994, pp. 68–69.

<sup>22</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Modern Times: Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics*, Zagreb, Multimedialni institut, 2017.

apocalyptic *Weltliteratur* is being produced. Ruth Ronen discusses the contemporary loss of the world, but not in the strictly phenomenological sense of a disappearing framework of authentic existential experience, but as a failure of actualisation. At the same time, her analysis of modal terms – analysed through an encounter between Lacan and Hintikka – moves away from the problem of possibility and possible worlds to focus instead on contingency. The failure of the contingent actualisation of a world is what can help us understand the contemporary fragmentation of the world into its multiple versions and the general disorientation this results in. Loss of the world and its multiplication are therefore two sides of the same coin. Jan Völker tackles Heidegger’s reflections on the loss of the world in the light of the current debates on the Anthropocene. Heidegger, Völker argues, brings our attention to the necessity of framing these debates within the even more urgent need to rethink our relation to being as what is at stake in the loss of the world. Magdalena Germek approaches the concept of world through the metaphor of anatomy. In what way can we speak of the death of a world, or of its coming to life? Through these questions, Germek’s article provides a new perspective on Badiou’s logical definition of worlds and the truth procedures that invigorate or mortify them.

Badiou’s concept of world is further analysed by Nick Nesbitt, but in more political terms in connection to Marx. Nesbitt’s article brings our attention to Badiou’s curious neglect of capitalism as the dominant logic of the modern world. Yet, instead of stopping at Badiou’s shortcomings, Nesbitt claims that Badiou has, in fact, produced a formalisation of Marx’s logical procedure in *Capital*. Marina Gržinić offers another political reflection on the world as established by capitalism and especially colonialism. Through Mbembe and other contemporary critics, Gržinić’s text revolves around the task of decolonising the concept of world and the political realities it refers to.

The concluding series of texts focuses on the multiplicity of worlds and the status of world as a fictional category. My own contribution reflects on the contemporary actualisation of Leibnizian possible worlds, outlining a “hypercorrelationist” conception of a transcendental multiplicity of worlds. Emphasising the fictional structures at work in constructing such worlds, I re-examine Deleuze’s and Badiou’s subversion of Leibniz. I also analyse the political importance of such fictional structures in Kant’s definition of cosmopolitanism and Rancière’s definition of politics as a conflict of worlds. Jean-Jacques Lecercle responds to

my thoughts on the subject by testing my conceptions in a reading of Virginia Woolf's last novel. In *Between the Acts*, Lecercle retraces both the unification and the dispersal of worlds as transcendental frameworks. To the merely fictional construction of worlds, Lecercle contrasts their social construction through language, interpellation, and ideological apparatuses, while also reflecting on the specific role literature plays in these processes. Nika Grabar uses Rancière's conception of the distribution of the sensible to reflect on the world-building capacity of architecture. In what sense can the different regimes of architecture today build a different world – and for whom? Anna Longo's contribution confronts the hypothesis that we are living in a simulation comparable to the one presented in the *Matrix* films. Tracing the philosophical and social presuppositions and consequences of this hypothesis as formulated by David J. Chalmers, Longo proposes a Nietzschean critique that contrasts this calculating simulation to the proper artistic power of becoming. Noa Levin's text, finally, focuses on two contemporary readings of Leibniz that go against the grain of the established reception of Leibniz as an optimistic thinker of historical progress. Benjamin's and Deleuze's readings help us put into perspective Leibniz's notions of eternal return and the multiplicity of worlds.

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