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Book Review

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(Sun Zhouxing, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, Future Philosophy
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Zhaonong Wang

**Technological Domination and the Twofold of Human Existence:
A Review of Sun Zhouxing's *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene***

Abstract: Sun Zhouxing's treatise, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, confronts the profound challenges posed by the technologically dominant Anthropocene while seeking to reconstruct our understanding of the life-world. This endeavor is central to his philosophy of the future, where the impact of modern technology on human existence emerges as a critical issue that must be addressed. Grounded in the philosophy of existence, Sun's work positions Nietzsche's concept of the overman (Übermensch) as the "Overman-Future Man" within a contemporary framework. Furthermore, drawing on Heidegger's analysis of the essence of modern technology, the transformation of natural human beings into technological human beings is elucidated. Most crucially, Sun's exploration highlights the twofold (*Zwiefalt*) nature of naturalness and technicality in human existence. It is through this revelation and the adoption of a stance of technological destinism that a unique solution is proposed for the redefinition of human existence under the conditions of technological domination.

Zusammenfassung: Sun Zhouxings Abhandlung *Die Philosophie des Anthropozäns* konfrontiert die tiefgreifenden Herausforderungen, die durch das technologisch dominierte Anthropozän gestellt werden, und versucht gleichzeitig, unser Verständnis der Lebenswelt zu rekonstruieren. Dieses Unterfangen ist zentral für seine Philosophie der Zukunft, in der der Einfluss moderner Technologie auf die menschliche Existenz als ein kritisches Thema hervortritt. Ein Thema, mit dem sich die Menschheit auseinandersetzen muss. Basierend auf der Existenzphilosophie positioniert Sun Nietzsches Konzept des Übermenschen als den „Übermensch-Zukunftsmensch“ und diskutiert diese Idee in einem zeitgenössischen Rahmen. Darüber hinaus wird anhand von Heideggers Analyse

des Wesens der modernen Technik die Transformation natürlicher Menschen in technologische Menschen erläutert. Besonders wichtig ist, dass Suns Untersuchung die Doppelnatur von Natürlichkeit und Technizität in der menschlichen Existenz hervorhebt (als *Zwiefalt*). Durch diese Offenbarung und die Annahme einer Haltung des technologischen Destinismus wird eine einzigartige Lösung für die Neudefinition der menschlichen Existenz unter den Bedingungen der technologischen Dominanz vorgeschlagen.

摘要：孙周兴的论著《人类世的哲学》直面技术统治下的“人类世”所带来的深刻挑战，将重建生活世界经验作为本己追求。这一追求构成了其未来哲学的基石，尤其是现代技术对人类实存的触动成为未来哲学必须解决的重要课题。这本论著以实存哲学为理论基础，为尼采的超人（*Übermensch*）概念取得了一个当代定位，即“超人—未来人”；进一步，孙周兴沿着海德格尔对现代技术之本质的分析，明确了自然人向技术人转变的现实境况；最重要的是，他以此阐述了人类实存之自然性与技术性的二重性（*Zwiefalt*）难题。而正是通过对二重性的揭示以及对一种技术命运论之立场的阐明，为在技术统治下对人类实存的重新规定提供了一个独特的方案。

Keywords: *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, Technological Domination, Overman-Future Man, *Zwiefalt*, Technological Destinism

The *Philosophy of the Anthropocene*¹ is a central work in Sun Zhouxing's "Trilogy of Future Philosophy," which explores his reflections on the philosophy of the future, described as the quasar of philosophy ("未来才是哲思的准星"²). Within the context of the Anthropocene, characterized by technological domination, modern technologies—such as nuclear energy, endocrine disruptors (环境激素), genetic engineering, and intelligent technology—pose significant threats to human existence. In this crisis, the role of philosophy becomes crucial. Sun highlights a key aspect of Heidegger's inquiry: the notion that modern technology touches the essence of human beings. Heidegger cautions that "the rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of

1 孙周兴：《人类世的哲学》（transl. as *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*），商务印书馆，2020年。

2 Ibid., 69.

a more primal truth.”³ This leads us to ask: how does the *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene* reveal and address this potential threat?

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of “technological destinism” as presented in the *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, focusing on its implications for human existence. Central to this analysis is the philosophy of existence, which serves as the theoretical foundation of the philosophy of the future. The paper will address the following points: Firstly, how technological domination affects the essence of the human being and how Sun conceptualizes the transformation from “natural human beings” (自然人) to “technological human beings” (技术人). Secondly, how the philosophy of the future, grounded in the philosophy of existence, reinterprets Nietzsche’s concept of the overman as the “future man” (未来人). Thirdly, how, within the framework of Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology and the concept of “technological destinism,” Sun defines human existence in the twofold (*Zwiefalt*) of naturalness and technicality of human existence.

1. Technological Domination and Human Existence

In its original context, the term “Anthropocene” was introduced to describe a new geological epoch marked by human dominance. This concept suggests that human activity is exerting an increasingly significant influence on the planet, to the extent that it poses an existential threat through an uncontrollable geological crisis. Such a crisis, it could be argued, is beyond human ability to prevent or control. As a concept in future philosophy, it indicates the technological domination that results in this uncontrollable situation. What is meant by the term “technological domination”? Unlike political domination, which is rooted in the principles of philosophy and religion, technological domination represents a shift in power. Philosophy traditionally provides the foundational tenets for social institutions and organization, while religion offers moral and ethical norms, particularly in the West. However,

3 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, in: *Basic Writings: Ten Key Essays, plus the Introduction to Being and Time*, transl. by David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper Collins, 1993, 333.

both have been profoundly shaped by modern technology. The concept of the Anthropocene, therefore, signifies that “technological domination has overpowered political domination,”⁴ aligning with the core orientation of the philosophy of the future, which asserts that “the future has come”⁵ and points to the ascendancy of technological domination in the Anthropocene.

Sun’s interpretation of the transition from “natural human beings” to “technological human beings” emphasizes the impact on human existence. Since religion, philosophy, science, and technology are all human-made phenomena that reflect human existence, it can be argued that, “from the perspective of natural human beings,” the Anthropocene (literally in Chinese, “human-world”) represents a “non-Anthropocene” (literally in Chinese, “non-human-world”) era, symbolizing a disruption to natural-human civilization (自然人类文明) caused by technology and industry. This rupture has resulted in a new world order—a techno-human life-world (技术人类生活世界).⁶ In other words, the deeper crisis of the Anthropocene lies in the fact that technology has the power to fundamentally transform human beings, leading to a drastic alteration in their existence, which is no longer aligned with their natural state.

By taking the philosophy of existence as a critical premise for the philosophy of the future, Sun presents technological domination as a force that erases individuality. Under this domination, individuals are averaged, undifferentiated, and homogenized within the flood of technology and data, losing their uniqueness and diversity. Yet, recognizing the intrinsic differences between individuals is fundamental to the human experience; without this capacity, experience itself would lose the ability to differentiate one experience from another. Consequently, under technological domination, “our experience stands idle, we don’t know how to ground it, we don’t know how to grasp things, we don’t know how to

4 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 100.

5 孙周兴：《积极生活的理由：一种未来哲学的追问》（transl., *The Reason of Active Living: A Philosophy of The Future Inquiries*），商务印书馆，2023年，第33页。

6 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 102.

define what is around us,”⁷ leading to the hollowing out of life itself. This has resulted in the collapse of what Sun refers to as the “natural human spiritual expression system” (自然人类精神文明表达系统), causing a drastic transformation in both the life-world and life experience.

Based on this existentialist premise, the “philosophy of the Anthropocene” or the philosophy of the future is not merely a philosophy of technology; it is also a rethinking and redefinition of human existence. It begins with the philosophy of existence and extends to the development of a new philosophy of life,⁸ with the reconstruction of the life-world experience (生活世界经验) as its central task. This, in essence, represents one of the main ideas of Sun’s work.

2. Redefinition of Human Existence: The Overman-Future Man

In reframing the concept of human existence, Sun situates Nietzsche’s “overman” (*Übermensch*) within the contemporary context of the Anthropocene, envisioning the overman as the “future man” (未来人). This conceptualization raises several critical questions: How does this new understanding of human existence develop? Where might it lead? And how does it shape the philosophy of the future and our understanding of human existence?

The concept of the “overman” is built upon the premise that “God is dead,” which negates two core pillars of philosophical thought: the belief in essentialism and the construction of an essential world, as well as the foundational doctrines of theology and the ideal world. This dual negation signals “a decline in the natural human spirit.”⁹ Thus, the overman represents not only the transcendence of the self but also the necessity of overcoming humanity itself, as Nietzsche asserts that “man is something that shall be overcome.”¹⁰ Yet, this

7 Ibid., 242.

8 See Zhouxing Sun, “新生命哲学：如何筹划未来生命？”(transl. as A New Philosophy Of Life: The New Philosophy Of Life: How To Plan and Prepare for the Life of the Future?), *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 327-335.

9 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 297.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, SW 4, ed. by Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980, 14. (For the English translation of this work,

brings forth a complex challenge: How can we define our identity while simultaneously transcending essentialism? Nietzsche pairs the concept of the overman with that of the “last man” (der letzte Mensch), implying that any definition of the overman inherently involves a counter-definition of the last man.

Essentialism has provided a robust foundation for the natural sciences, enabling their growth and dominance through technological advancement. In this context, the last man can be understood as “technological human beings,” which refers to the essential transformation of natural human beings as they enter the technological-industrial realm.¹¹ The concept of “formal transcendence” (形式超越)—understood as a transcendence in ontology or existentialism that surpasses any individual or specific entity—and the notion of “divine transcendence”—referring to a transcendent God and divinity, constructed through linear causality—represent a unidirectional upward transcendence toward the supersensible world. In contrast, the overman’s transcendence is oriented “downward,” toward the earth, as Nietzsche expresses: “the overman shall be the meaning of the earth [...] remain faithful to the earth.”¹²

Sun analyzes that the concept of the “overman” represents a redefinition of human essence as existence. On one hand, the overman signifies “transcending past human beings and their natural state,” referring to the “transition from natural human beings to technological human beings” under the technological domination of the Anthropocene. From this perspective, on the other hand, Nietzsche’s call to “remain faithful to the earth” signifies a commitment to preserving human naturalness, as interpreted by Sun.¹³ Thus, the concept of the overman embodies a twofold (*Zwiefalt*) of naturalness and technicality, within which human existence is revealed.

Furthermore, Sun integrates the concept of the overman’s downward transcendence with Heidegger’s analysis of existence to formulate a definition of hu-

see *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, transl. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Penguin, 1978.)

11 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 291.

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, SW 4, 14-15.

13 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 312.

man existence for the philosophy of the future. In my view, this approach has the potential to reconcile essentialism and existentialism, as Sun advocates for the philosophy of existence while acknowledging that individuals can embody both essentialist and existentialist perspectives. The essentialist stance implies that “I am what I am,” defining human beings in terms of the roles they play, whereas from an existentialist viewpoint, “existence (*Ek-sistenz*) originally meant ‘out of place’” and “‘out of place’ is being creative.”¹⁴ Therefore, the only “essence” of human existence is the existence itself, and the transcendence of the overman is proved to be being “out of place”. This is how he combines Nietzsche’s notion of the overman with Heidegger’s reflections on human existence, asserting that “Nietzsche’s ‘overman’ must be the ‘new man,’ the ‘future man.’”¹⁵ And more importantly, this leads Sun to reconceptualize human existence within the framework of the philosophy of the future, emphasizing potentiality and freedom: human beings are free individuals, open to the future and capable of immediate action; they possess a free essence, constantly oriented toward the future; and as such, they must actualize their essence through creative acts.¹⁶

It seems to me that the author’s approach to the redefinition of human existence is particularly insightful, because it not only integrated Nietzsche’s concept of the overman with Heidegger’s thinking of human existence as the Overman-Future Man, but also reconciled essentialism and existentialism, redefining human existence as the Overman-Future Man from the perspective of the philosophy of the future, that is, within the context of technological dominance. This dual combination, on the one side, allows us to place Nietzsche and Heidegger in a contemporary context, and on the other side, provides existential philosophy with a more inclusive philosophical stance.

Still more importantly, Sun sees in overman both a facing up to technicality and the preservation of naturalness, which is, arguably, the twofold nature of the Overman-Future Man. Actually, he took his inquiry a step further, posing a cru-

14 Ibid., 229.

15 Ibid., 307.

16 Ibid., 229-230.

cial question: “Is it possible to achieve a balance between the twofold of naturalness and technicality inherent” of the Overman-Future Man? This dilemma can also be stated as: “What are the limits of the technologization (de-naturalization) of natural human beings?”¹⁷

3. The Essence of Modern Technology and the Twofold Nature of Human Existence

We may consider Sun’s question in the context of a more general perspective, as it reveals a fundamental contradiction between necessity and freedom, akin to the problem of free will in traditional philosophy. This enables us to gain insight into how Sun deals with this tension of necessity and freedom through a technological destinism (技术命运论)¹⁸ stance, even if he does not explicitly define it in these two traditional terms. More specifically, Sun’s question of the limits of technologization can be analyzed in terms of these two aspects, as this question is also discussed in the context of technological destinism.

From the perspective of necessity, Sun elucidates Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology, namely, that technologization is a consequence of the intrinsic nature of modern technology and exists as an inherent necessity within the very essence of modern technology. In other words, the technological destinism is not merely an attitude towards technology, but primarily an inquiry into the fundamental nature of technology. And from the perspective of freedom, the question arises as to how the kind of freedom open to the future by the overman-future man is possible, while “we are controlled by technology, thrown into this world by technology,”¹⁹ and as if already determined by technicality.

Although Sun does not explicitly state this, the aforementioned pair of frames allows us to discern that his objective is to delineate the boundaries of technologization by confronting the dilemma of “choosing between determinism and destinism” within the twofold of naturalness and technicality. And in my assess-

17 Ibid., 314.

18 Ibid., 125.

19 Ibid., 151.

ment, Sun's premise is that determinism is associated with the technicality of human existence, as it only focused on the necessity, whereas destinism implies grasping the inherent tension in the twofold between naturalness and technicality. This duality encompasses both necessity and freedom/possibility. So, as we can see, to clarify the boundaries of technologization, Sun must confront the dilemma of "choosing between determinism and destinism"²⁰ in particularly in the context of the twofold between naturalness and technicality. The following paragraphs will provide a detailed account of the means by which he achieved this.

The necessity of technologization stems from the essence of modern technology, which Heidegger describes as "enframing" (*Gestell*) in his analysis of the history of Being. This concept supports Sun's argument regarding the twofold challenge of human existence in an era dominated by technology. Heidegger further connects enframing with truth as unconcealment (*ἀλήθεια*), revealing the source of modern technology's dominance. Enframing brings objects into view, "concentrates man upon ordering the actual as standing-reserve (*Bestand*)"²¹, presenting them as resources. However, this process remains objectifying, revealing things as "for us," while perpetually concealing the essence or Being of things. Modern technology has exponentially amplified this process, leading humans, in their pursuit of what is present to them as resources, to find themselves endangered by enframing, as Heidegger said: "The essence of technology lies in enframing. Its holding sway belongs within destining. [...] the other possibility is blocked—that man might rather be admitted sooner and ever more primally to the essence of what is unconcealed and to its unconcealment."²² Sun interprets this possibility as "revealing and unconcealment in the sense of *techne*, i.e., in the sense of art and handicraft," which represents "the natural human life-world." In other words, "the natural human life-world and the cultural world have decayed as a result of this enframing of modern technology."²³

20 Ibid., 152.

21 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", 324; Sun's discussion, for instance, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 140.

22 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", 331.

23 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 141.

To address this, Sun adopts a stance of technological destinism. In Heidegger's exploration of technology, the concept of "destining" (*Geschied*) captures the twofold of necessity and freedom. Heidegger states, "Always the unconcealment of that which is goes upon a way of revealing. Always the destining of revealing holds complete sway over men. But that destining is never a fate that compels. For man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens, though not one who simply obeys."²⁴

Sun builds upon this notion of "destining," developing a theory of technological destinism. It is important to note that technological destinism, as elucidated here, does not equate to technological determinism or technological optimism. Determinism implies a passive response to the technological realm, characterized by avoidance and lamentation, while technological optimism suggests that all problems can be solved through technology, leading to a passive reliance on it. In contrast, technological destinism advocates for "the twofold of submission and resistance"²⁵—both to reawaken a sense of destining in the face of technological supremacy and to actively resist technological domination through art and philosophy. This approach holds the potential to mitigate the collapse of natural human civilization.

In this way, the naturalness of human existence is preserved, and technicality (of human existence) forms a twofold relationship with it, rather than a dichotomy, maintaining a balanced tension. Technicality is an intrinsic aspect of modern technology and an inherent element of the destining of human existence. As we have been "thrown into the world by technology,"²⁶ our bodies are technologized through endocrine disruptors and biotechnology, and our intellect and spirit are universally technologized through the internet and artificial intelligence.²⁷ The potential for the Overman-Future Man to initiate the future does not merely negate the dichotomy between naturalness and technicality of human existence.

24 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", 330.

25 Zhouxing Sun, *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*, 147.

26 Ibid., 151.

27 Ibid., 327.

On the one hand, human naturalness must be safeguarded to prevent its complete subjugation by technology. On the other hand, in the twofold of submission and resistance to technicality, it is imperative to proactively engage in envisioning the future and reconstructing the technological life-world.²⁸

Sun acknowledges that the technological destinism presented here, which addresses the challenge of the Overman-Future Man's twofold of naturalness and technicality and its possible balance, is open to misinterpretation, particularly regarding the "resistance" advocated through philosophy and art, which may appear somewhat pessimistic. Nevertheless, it provides several pathways for confronting these challenges, aiming to reconstruct new experiences of the life-world and continually respond to the risks and challenges posed by modern technology in a distinctive philosophical manner. In a subsequent discussion of his book, Sun sets the tone for the *Philosophy of the Anthropocene*: "Irrespective of whether this world is perceived as good or bad, it is imperative to understand it as a positive one."²⁹ In summary, the redefinition of human existence under technological domination, the potential emergence of the Overman-Future Man, and the inherent twofold nature of naturalness and technicality can only be fully comprehended through the lens of such a technological destinism.

Zhaonong Wang

South China Normal University

Zhaonong Wang (王钊农), graduated from the School of Literature at South China Normal University, majoring in Chinese Language and Literature (Education). Research interests include phenomenology, Heidegger's philosophy, Roman Ingarden's thought, and literary theory.

28 Ibid., 330.

29 孙周兴：《何为哲学的转向——关于〈人类世的哲学〉》（trans., "What is the Philosophical Turn: On the *The Philosophy of the Anthropocene*"），载《哲学动态》2022年第1期。