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The Economic Singleton in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

Introduction

Economy is one of the most prominent themes in Don DeLillo's dystopian novel *Cosmopolis*. Studying the novel in context of the singleton theory offers a fresh framework for thinking about the economic system presented in *Cosmopolis*. On the other hand, applying the philosophical theory to a concrete example, the setting of *Cosmopolis*, can provoke additional work on some parts of the theory.

The singleton theory

Firstly, it is necessary to define the term singleton, especially as it has been used in different areas of study. The term originates from mathematics and it was extended to futurology by Nick Bostrom. He describes a singleton as "a world order in which there is a single decision-making agency at the highest level" ("What is a Singleton?" n.p.). A singleton would be able to control life over which it presides and effectively defend itself against external and internal threats to its reign. An example of a singleton is a global dictatorship with effective mind control technique. In order for such a regime to be a singleton, the mind control would have to encompass the entire human race. If the dictator could use it both to annihilate any idea which poses a threat to the regime and control the key elements of private and public life, his

regime would be a singleton. Bostrom claims that “[t]here are many possible singleton constitutions . . . A singleton could be a rather minimalist structure that could operate without significantly disrupting the lives of its inhabitants” (“Future” n.p.), and that “[i]t can contain within itself a highly diverse ecology of independent groups and individuals” (“Existential Risks” n.p.). A singleton does not need to be dystopian—for example, a global overlord using mind control—as Bostrom says that “[s]ingletons could be good, bad, or neutral” (“What is a Singleton?” n.p.). Different concepts such as ideologies, economic systems and moral codes could develop into singletons if they had control over their domain and could effectively defend their reign. Additionally, Bostrom introduces the “singleton hypothesis”: “[t]he singleton hypothesis is that Earth-originating intelligent life will (eventually) form a singleton” (“What is a Singleton?” n.p.). Although he doesn't claim that the singleton hypothesis is definitely true, he says that, through history, there has been “an overarching trend towards the emergence of higher levels of social organization” (“What is a Singleton?” n.p.) and that the trend aims toward the creation of a singleton.

The economic system of *Cosmopolis* as a singleton

Cosmopolis follows a day in the life of Eric Packer, a young and extremely successful financier. As Eric travels through New York to get a haircut, he encounters events which expose a technologically advanced society where finance plays an even more important role than in reality. It is easily conceivable that in the world of *Cosmopolis*, where finance plays such a crucial role, economy could be an entity powerful enough to become a singleton. The different distribution of power can be seen in Eric's dialogue with his security chief, Torval. While talking about a safety

threat to the president of the USA, who is in town at the time, Eric asks: "do people still shoot at presidents? I thought there were more stimulating targets" (20). The more stimulating targets are the financial moguls of *Cosmopolis*, whose power by far outstrips the power of the president of the USA. The most important part of economy in *Cosmopolis* is finance, where changes happen in tiny fractions of seconds and trading is done digitally. When he sees jewel traders, Eric encounters "a form of money so obsolete Eric didn't know how to think about it. It was hard, shiny, faceted. It was everything he'd left behind or never encountered, cut and polished, intensely three-dimensional" (64). He also wonders "why cash registers were not confined to display cases in a museum of cash registers" (71). Although the power of financiers relative to the power of politicians has already been established, it is also useful to see their direct influence on the contemporary situation in order to establish their prominent role in *Cosmopolis*. Even in the past "when he [Eric] was forecasting stocks, when forecasting was pure power, when he'd tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in share prices and the shifting of worldviews" (75), he was influential and over time that influence grew. While traveling through New York, Eric is betting extraordinary amounts of money against the yen, which is rising, and Eric is losing that money. As time passes,

There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading. He found the humor and lit a cigar. Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall. They opened their mouths and words came out. He knew it was the yen. His actions regarding the yen were causing storms of disorder. He was so leveraged, his firm's portfolio large and sprawling, linked crucially to the affairs of so many key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable, that the whole system was in danger. (115-16)

Unreasonable investments by Eric are causing worldwide instability. The fact that one single financier can cause such an amount of panic in several hours is another argument showing the great power of finance in *Cosmopolis*. The capitalism portrayed in the novel already strongly influences life through money, but it is hard to determine if the control is of an economic singleton's level. Even if it is not quite strong enough, the economic system could increase the amount of control it has over human life through money. Randy Laist says that "Eric himself is a kind of third Twin Tower, a monolithic symbol of global economic hegemony" (153). Eric both symbolizes and personifies the capitalist economic system. The protagonist's behavior in the novel is an autodestructive sequence leading to his usage of the last bullet in his gun to fire at his own hand. The fact that the economic system is autodestructive gives a window to humanity to overthrow it. If this is considered to be an internal threat, than the economic system clearly is not a singleton. This idea will be further analyzed later in this paper. In his dialogue with Benno, a former employee and Eric's murderer, Eric claims to have evolved. If Benno decides not to kill him, it is not clear that there will be another chance to prevent him from becoming a singleton. Eric, who symbolizes the economic system of *Cosmopolis*, as a singleton is a dystopian vision of the future. Benno Levin's killing of Eric, the humanity eliminating the current economic system, is the solution to the dysfunctional economic system and the potentially incoming economic singleton offered by *Cosmopolis*.

The implications of the study of *Cosmopolis* for the singleton theory

Eric's autodestructive behaviour raises a question about the the singleton theory: can an established singleton willingly terminate its status as a singleton? Autodestructive behaviour is an internal threat, but a singleton might be able to choose not to use its ability to defend itself against threats. It seems likely that some types of singleton would be able to stop being singletons, while other types would not. For example, it is easily conceivable that a superintelligent artificial intelligence becomes a singleton, but at one point decides that being a singleton is no longer in its interest. In such a situation, it seems logical that the superintelligent artificial intelligence could withdraw from its position as a singleton. A different singleton, such as an omnipresent moral code, might be unable to stop being a singleton since it lacks an active consciousness. Although a moral code can be a singleton, it is not an agent the way other singletons (an artificial intelligence, a global dictator) are. Bostrom divides singletons into good, bad and neutral ones ("What is a Singleton?" n.p.). It seems useful to also divide them into sentient singletons and unconscious singletons. There are other important differences between them other than the fact that sentient ones can willingly stop being a singleton. For example, communicating with an unconscious singleton is impossible, while it theoretically is possible to communicate with some sentient ones¹. Additionally, an entity which has "the ability to exert effective control over major features of its domain" ("What is a Singleton?"

¹ It is possible to think of a configuration where the subjects have not developed means of communicating with their singleton, or of a sentient singleton which decided to prevent its subjects from communicating with it.

n.p.) should at least be able to choose to exert zero control over its domain, if not remove the ability to exert control altogether. It has already been established² that a singleton can exert different levels of control over its domain. Introducing the passive singleton, a singleton subclass, is compatible with the previous theory regarding singletons. A passive singleton is a singleton which chooses only to defend its reign against threats, but not to exert control over it. Although the possibility for a passive singleton is a relatively unsubstantial part of the singleton theory, it is conceivable that a singleton would be interested in temporarily removing its influence (but retaining its power to defend its reign) in order to encourage its subjects to search for an alternative method of governance or for an altogether different reason. Bostrom says: "it [a singleton] need not prohibit novelty and experimentation, since it would retain the capacity to intervene at a later stage to protect its constitution if some developments turned malignant" ("Future" n.p.). Since a singleton retains its ability to intervene in order to prevent an undesirable development, choosing not to exert control over its domain might be a valid strategical choice in some situations. An issue with the singleton theory which is clearly visible when trying to apply it to a concrete example is the fact that it is hard to determine exactly what amount of "effective control over major features of its domain" is necessary for an entity to be a singleton. While additional theoretical work on this problem would help make the theory more precise, this is not a major insufficiency. Even if it is hard to determine whether an entity which is capable of defending itself against threats has control over its domain of a singleton's level or of slightly lower magnitude, an entity slightly too weak to be a singleton is already an extremely important factor in its world. Analyzing

2 By Nick Bostrom in the paper "What is a Singleton?"



the entity in the context of the advantages and disadvantages of a singleton could still help better understand it, even if it is not quite as powerful to be a singleton. Additionally, an entity which is almost powerful enough to be a singleton could over time develop into a regular singleton, so that studying it in the context of the singleton theory could help judge if such a development should be encouraged or prevented.

Conclusion

After the global economic crisis of 2007, there has been a renewed appreciation of *Cosmopolis*. Applying the singleton theory to *Cosmopolis* enables approaching a thoroughly studied novel from a different perspective. Such an interdisciplinary approach can not only broaden the interpretation of a literary work, but it also simultaneously estranges the philosophical ideas applied to the novel and in that way it can help increase the understanding of both areas of study.

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