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Posted Date: 3 July 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202507.0269.v1

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Article

# The Mind as Large as a World: AI, Consciousness, and the Collapse of Meaning

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## Abstract

Professor Nir Eisikovits (2023) recently advanced the theory that Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses an existential risk to humanity, but one that is philosophical rather than apocalyptic. While film and television has explored the latter outcome of the use of AI extensively since the 1980s, with the archetypal hero inevitably pulling humanity back from the brink, it has yet to fully explore the philosophical dilemmas posed by AI and, moreover, the conflicts between faith and reason. David Benioff and D. B. Weiss's *3 Body Problem* (Netflix, 2024) has recently sought to address this gap through the adoption of a philosophical approach to the implications of sentient AI being used in society. As such, this paper will assess the series in line with Eisikovits' assertion in order to explore the philosophical dimensions of the narrative and its ideological significance. Applying a philosophical theoretical framework to close textual analysis of the show itself, this paper will argue that *3 Body Problem* embraces the existential angst of humanity as it becomes entangled with questions of faith and reason where science and technology begin to encroach on the human experience.

**Keywords:** television; *3 Body Problem*; philosophy; existentialism; artificial intelligence; ethics

## 1. Introduction

Heralded as the comeback of showrunners David Benioff and D. B. Weiss's following the criticism of the final season of *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), *3 Body Problem* (Netflix, 2024) offers a philosophical interrogation of "...what quantum mechanics might look like in real time" (Romano, 2024i, n.p.). Adapted from Liu Cixin's 2006 science fiction novel of the same name, the television show is grounded in science as much as it is built on philosophy in order to explore contemporary concerns about the intersection of technology, faith and the future of humanity.

The premise of the show is complicated and ambiguous in places, straddling the categories of murder mystery and science fiction discovery of alien life forms somewhere in the universe. It also exhibits a nonlinear narrative that depicts the past, present and virtual realities through the premise of a gaming headset. Indeed, in the present day of 2024, we are told early in the series that several scientists are dead while others cease working on their current projects after being confronted by a countdown that only they can see unless they comply with demands to shut their research down. The past is viewed through the character of astrophysicist Ye Wenjie (the younger played by Zine Tseng, the older by Rosalind Chao). Her experiences as a political prisoner in Communist China in the 1960s and 1970s recount how humanity invited extra-terrestrial life to join us on Earth in the first place. The present is filtered through the moral dilemmas of the Oxford Five – Dr Saul Durand (Jovan

Adepo), Jack Rooney (John Bradley), Dr Auggie Salazar (Eiza Gonzalez), Dr Jin Cheng (Jess Hong) and Dr Will Downing (Alex Sharp) – who have an academic background in physics from Oxford University and each face a variety of ethical dilemmas and decisions throughout the series. Furthermore, it is notable that the virtual reality worlds designed within *3 Body Problem* are also explored by and through them. As reviewer Palmer Haasch (2024) points out:

...the show works best when it allows those characters to dive into the meat of the problems themselves. Some of the show's biggest-scale -- and most intellectually intriguing -- sequences take place in a virtual world that allows Benioff, Weiss, and Woo to render everything from a planet engulfed in flame to massive armies functioning as computers (n.p.).

While this observation is wholly subjective, it captures the impact that utilising imaginary worlds alongside the past and present has on the series as well as the usefulness in providing the scope to explore the nature of humanity through realities that bring faith and science together. Indeed, the alignment of the three induces chaos that reflects on the three-body problem as a concept and invites philosophical interrogation.

The three-body problem is actually a theory in physics relating to astrodynamics, specifically "...describ[ing] the motion of three-point mass particles under their mutual gravitational interactions" and which no single equation can always solve because the motion of the bodies becomes chaotic (Guibout & Scheeres, 2006, p.102). It provides inspiration for the novel and subsequently through Benioff and Weiss's adaptation through the thematic concerns of fear of the unknown, the presence of life elsewhere in the universe and the inability to reconcile the chaos of the universe with the need for stability on the part of humanity. There is a literal three-body problem referenced in the second episode of the series through the signal sent out by the Chinese to contact extra-terrestrial, which involves Earth, Jupiter and the sun. Similarly, it is a facet of a virtual reality video game that scientists are invited to address in order to save ostensibly human civilisations, but it is the significance of the problem that influences the narrative and its ideological ramifications. Both will be explored in greater depth here.

This paper examines *3 Body Problem* by applying close textual analysis as a methodological approach to the primary text while simultaneously applying a philosophical theoretical framework that incorporates existentialism and ethics. It will initially provide a literature review to introduce relevant philosophical concepts before establishing a narrative analysis, ideological analysis and a discussion of the relationship between Artificial Intelligence (henceforth AI) and consciousness. Each of these sections will contribute to assessing the thesis that *3 Body Problem* embraces the existential angst of humanity as it becomes entangled with questions of faith and reason where science and technology begin to encroach on the human experience.

## 2. Literature Review

There are several theoretical and philosophical concepts that are relevant to discussions of how *3 Body Problem* approaches key questions of how science and technology encroach on the human experience and impact on the functioning of society. Existentialism is one of the most applicable philosophical concepts when exploring how AI encroaches on humanity and is integral to the analytical framework applied to *3 Body Problem* here. Grounded in the meaning, purpose and value of human existence, existentialism places emphasis on the human subject and the experience of living in an increasingly absurd world (Macquarrie, 1972). That is not to say that existentialism is a straightforward theory, but rather a tapestry of theoretical positions posited by philosophers who adopt different subjectivities and perspectives, thus expanding the applicable framework to almost boundless levels. For instance, Thomas Flynn's (2006) introduction to existentialism places emphasis on the need to reject the certainty associated with maths and science in order to move beyond the measurable and objective towards "...a 'leap' of sorts, an act of faith in a certain set of values that were not themselves measurable" (p.4). As such, existentialism is difficult to define because it

incorporates an ambiguity that impacts on understanding. Basic questions invite further thought, but may take multiple forms depending on the nature of the approach taken. For this reason, it is important to clarify the approach this paper will take. In fact, it adopts a dual position concerned with Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of nihilism and the broader existentialist concern with ethics.

As an existentialist theory, nihilism is concerned with the intellectualism of society's shift away from a religious worldview to a more secular and scientific one, which, according to Nietzsche (2003), had led to the modern conditions of anxiety, meaninglessness and alienation. It therefore requires an acceptance of the evolution of society and the way in which that evolution influences humanity and the ethical code that underpins it:

...social transformations created the conditions for nihilism, where modern humanity suddenly found itself adrift and confused, unsure of which path to take or where to look for a stable and enduring sense of truth and meaning. The condition of nihilism involves the shocking recognition that there is no overarching reason, order, or purpose to our existence, that it is all fundamentally meaningless and absurd.

(Aho, 2023, n.p.)

Meaning is therefore fundamental to the human experience and the search for meaning a driving force for humanity. However, this subsequently raises the idea of sense and value, which Nietzsche considered critical to his thought and are dependent on perspective (Deleuze, 2006). If there is no purpose to our existence then the value of everything is negligible, and sense cannot be made out of events that encroach on the everyday. Such existential questions are asked in *3 Body Problem* and can be applied to multiple situations that occur throughout the first season. Existentialism is applied through the overt juxtaposition of science and religion, but it is also considered through the presence of multiple technologies that push the boundaries of knowledge and the audience's understanding of how the quest for knowledge may be detrimental to humanity as a whole.

Existentialism has been applied to thought concerning AI in recent years, with Nir Eisikovits (2023) arguing that it poses an existential threat to humanity, but through philosophical means as opposed to the apocalyptic scenarios that have long been articulated in analyses that emphasise the risk of extinction over the impact that it has on the nature of humanity. Eisikovits (2023) points out that humans are judgement making creatures and this is where the threat posed by AI lies: "...there is an existential danger inherent in using AI, but that risk is existential in the philosophical... AI in its current form can alter the way people view themselves. It can degrade abilities and experiences that people consider essential to being human" (n.p.). As such, it is the potential loss of the ability or capacity to make judgements that should concern humanity as opposed to how regulatory systems limit AI's potential to become autonomous. The threat to losing what it is to be human is therefore existential, but leads to larger ethical questions of technological advancement in general.

The ethics of technology are important in *3 Body Problem* and are filtered through the juxtaposition of faith and reason as much as the presence of technologies that introduce alternative realities. Ethics are important in existentialist theory, which contends that a moral life is possible providing that we own our freedom, take responsibility for our choice and help others to realise their freedoms (Aho, 2023). Lawrence Schmidt and Scott Marratti (2008) concur with this perspective, arguing that technology should not be rejected for its potential catastrophe, but should be applied with consideration of ethics as a fundamental part of culture because social crises relate to the transformation of ethics brought about by technology and those who misuse it. The misuse of technology is a key theme in *3 Body Problem* and thus introduces ethics into the narrative, particularly during debates between the Oxford Five as to how and when technologies should be used. This is a point touched on by Rufus Black (2002), who argues that science challenges the idea that it is independent from ethics, but it is ethical subjectivity that points to the idea that "...there is *not* an inherent tension between a scientific world view and a world view which affirms that there are truths beyond those knowable by science" (p.40). This statement is contentious and is addressed extensively in the show. Philosophically, there is tensions between faith and reason, with the former extending into the unknowable that exceeds what is within the parameters of science. However, it is pushing

those parameters that poses a threat to the ethical dimensions of the human experience, as has been explored by visual media throughout the history of visual media.

The science fiction genre of television lends itself to the exploration of the scientific concepts presented in *3 Body Problem*, including those of quantum entanglement and nanotechnology. From a genre-based point of view, the roots of science fiction can be found before the development of technology that brings television into a domestic setting because they emerge from the ability to explore alternative realities and their related photographic representations (Booker, 2004). However, it is well documented that the genre itself is not easily defined as a consequence of its ability to evolve alongside new technological developments and discourses pertaining to the anxieties, fears and concerns that accompany them. For instance, Lincoln Geraghty (2009) points out that science fiction cannot be narrowed into a single set of traits because it spans a range of features and characteristics, thus avoiding any form of “conceptual consistency” (p.2). However, it is one genre that “...has allowed space for both story and spectacle” (Geraghty, 2009, p.49). This point is important in the context of *3 Body Problem*, which adopts the traits that Benioff and Weiss championed in *Game of Thrones* through the blending of the everyday and the spectacular as channelled through the experiences of individual characters (Wells-Lassagne, 2015; Coopey, 2023). Although *Game of Thrones* could not be described as science fiction, the same principle can be applied to *3 Body Problem* because of the narrative approach taken to the series and the embedding of spectacle at various moments.

However, there are also other concepts to consider in terms of how visual media represent and / or mediate symbolic movement over mechanic movement in science fiction. Seung-Hack Chi (2023), for example, refers to cinematic meta-mechanics, or film as an industrial platform for shaping human and social values through repetition or symbolism:

The value of the concept of cinematic meta-mechanics is not only that it underlies the conventional use (cliché) of artificial intelligence (AI) in science fiction and fantasy films but also that it conveys to us the homogeneity of autoeroticism and automation in cinema. Thereby, cinematic meta-mechanisms help predict the technological aspects of future-oriented AI and enable greater insight into the labor problems of contemporary society.  
(p.1036)

This quote relates directly to concerns with AI and how they are presented in television, mediating tensions and anxieties by juxtaposing sentient technology with humanity and the battle required for the latter to retain autonomy and control over the former. Such sentiments are also expressed by Linda Hutcheon (1990) in relation to the importance of the autonomous individual. Although the narrative in *3 Body Problem* does hint at the apocalyptic at different points, it errs more on the side of the philosophical so the concept of meta-mechanics can be applied to television as much as it may be applied to cinema. The importance of automation to everyday life is a source of anxiety in the show but also a source of pleasure, or at least it should be a source of pleasure in the gaming aspect of the narrative. Instead, its presence indicates a future-oriented AI and provides insight into bigger philosophical problems, such as the relationship between science and civilisation in the quests the characters embark on. As such, the concept is useful in exploring the ramifications of technology for humanity and illustrates the extent to which narrative analysis is useful in deconstructing the philosophical issues that have been discussed in this section of the paper.

### 3. Narrative Analysis

There are several aspects of the narrative of *3 Body Problem* that demand close scrutiny in order to explore the philosophical dimensions of the show. The first aspect relates to the characters, their development and the impact they have on the decisions made in relation to the safeguarding of humanity. The most prominent character in this respect is Ye Wenjie. Her motivations are projected through her growing disillusionment with humanity and its inability to save itself. This is a point she repeatedly stresses through the flashback scenes as well as her discussions later with Jin, Saul and Thomas Wade (Liam Cunningham), the head of the MI6 and the Strategic Intelligence Agency, in

particular. However, the most obvious symbol of that disillusionment is her recollection of the poster that she saw after the murder of her father featuring the message “Destroy the old world. Forge the new world” (S1 E6). Similarly, Ye Wenjie’s decision to contact the Trisolarans, or the San-Ti, is driven by the same principle. The Communist world that contributed to the formation of her worldview encourages her to take Flynn’s (2006) leap or act of faith towards unmeasurable values that she does not associate with those that oppressed her. Ironically, she also embraces the certainty associated with maths and science Flynn (2006) suggests should be rejected, harnessing the power of both science and technology to save a humanity that refused to save her. Such contradictions are bound to existential thought and can therefore be interpreted through it.

The Oxford Five and their ideologies are also central to the narrative and serve to drive the show’s philosophical dimensions forwards. Their motivations provide an interesting subject for analysis as a consequence of their diverse perspectives of the alien threat. The ideological positioning of the Oxford Five is inconsistent, meaning that they all hold different values and moral frameworks. The debates that occur between them are therefore enlightening. Auggie, for instance, has a strict moral code that takes collateral damage into account. Jack, on the other hand, is selfish and concerned only with his own pleasure. Jin and Saul sit somewhere between the two and, along with Will, complete the spectrum. However, despite their differences, all opinions hold equal weight and contribute to the ongoing dialogue that assesses the importance of behaving ethically for the sake of humanity. Similarly, this approach safeguards humanity through the safeguarding of judgements, as per Eisikovits (2023).

The ethical dilemmas and ramifications presented in *3 Body Problem* stem from the portrayal of scientific discovery and technological advancement. Such dilemmas begin in the first episode when Saul, in conversation with Vera Ye (Vedette Lim), suggests that “[s]cience is broken” and contention that the major physics theories advanced since the 1960s are wrong (S1 E2). The contention is controversial to say the least, but the idea that such a broad statement can be examined through a television show provides a narrative hook that introduces ethical questions based on existing knowledge instead of raising them solely in relation to new technological developments. This is reinforced in the ensuing scene when Vera commits suicide by jumping into the generator’s Cherenkov tank before the project they are working on is shut down completely. Vera had asked Saul if he believes in God. He replies: “Is that what it’s come to? No, I don’t. I accept that this defies all known laws of physics, but I don’t think that’s an argument for God.” Vera’s ensuing question, “[s]o what’s left?” is bleak and opens up a range of possibilities for the narrative to explore the importance of science in establishing certainty. The philosophical question Vera asks emphasises the existential problem that underpins the narrative and it is further reinforced later in the episode when the phrase “science is broken” is uttered twice in a conversation between MI6 officer Clarence “Da” Shi (Benedict Wong) and his co-worker Collins (Gerard Monaco). The contention therefore leaves space for something else, for reason to manifest.

The potential consequences of contact with extra-terrestrial civilisation lean into the existential threat of the unknown when Ye Wenjie first hears from another being in response to the message that was sent out to invite a response: “Do not answer. I am a pacifist in this world. You are lucky that I am the first to receive your message. I am warning you: do not answer. If you respond, we will come. Your world will be conquered. Do not answer” (S1 E2). It is not clear who the pacifist is or what threat his civilisation poses to humanity, but the wording is explicit and makes clear the potential threat to Earth should its existence become known. Ye Wenjie’s response does not correlate with the existential threat, though, and neither does it contain any fear for potential reprisals from her superiors, or captors depending on how her situation is interpreted. Instead, the setting sun casts half her face in shadow as she furtively looks around and responds directly to the pacifist, turning on the communications machine and looking up the correct code to send a response to the celestial body that will amplify it: “Come. We cannot save ourselves. I will help you conquer this world.” The moral dilemmas encountered by characters in their pursuit of scientific knowledge and technological

solutions therefore straddle the boundaries of faith and science, thus demonstrating the need for ideological analysis of existential values and ideas in the show.

#### 4. Ideological Analysis

*3 Body Problem* offers explicit, and indeed implicit, ideological positions that explore, reflect and challenge contemporary social, political and cultural ideas. *3 Body Problem* offers explicit social commentary through the political implications that are embedded in the narrative are filtered through a range of issues, including globalisation, environmentalism and the role of technology in society. The idea that science and technology offer answers to the question of how the universe works is advanced in the first episode, suggesting that it is only possible to understand life itself through that lens. The show adopts a political stance from the opening scene of the very first episode, which depicts a moment during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1966 that establishes the parameters for the rest of the series. Ye Wenjie witnesses the murder of her father Ye Zhetai, a physical professor at Tsinghua University, who is beaten following his refusal to admit that he is a counterrevolutionary and his renounce his belief in physics and scientific thought as a whole. When asked by a counterrevolutionary interrogator whether he believes in God, Ye Zhetai, bloodied and beaten by his captors, calmly states that “[s]cience has given no evidence either way” (S1 E1). The camera cuts to Ye Wenjie in the crowd as she closes her eyes, offering a medium close up of her face from above and indicating that his answer was not the one that his captors were looking for. The ensuing assault is brutal and leads unintentionally to his death, as evidenced by the stunned silence of the crowd and the shock on the faces of those beating him, but it captures the disjunction between science and faith that forms the basis of the show’s narrative. Science becomes a part of the political landscape through the rejection of widely held theories, such as Einstein’s theory of relativity, which Ye Zhetai is asked to renounce on stage.

Ye Wenjie’s speech at the Earth-Trisolaris movement summit (S1 E4) offers commentary on the ideological position that humanity has failed in its quest for a form of civilisation that enables us to be trusted with the world, adopting environmentalist messaging that suggests there is an existential threat to the planet from science and technology:

I saw human beings cut each other to pieces, destroy each other without a thought, all in the name of progress. And what has changed? We continue to destroy each other and the world around us. We cannot save ourselves, but we are not alone. Four light years away, the San-Ti have achieved miracles beyond our wildest imagination, in spite of the chaos that plagues their world. And now, they are coming to share their knowledge with us, to teach us how to survive and to thrive.

Indeed, the context is important in establishing Ye Wenjie’s opposition to humanity as it exists in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the 21st century. The environmental destruction is part of the Chinese’s vision of progress, but not hers. Her concern for progress is overshadowed by the importance of cultural purity. This is actually ironic given that the cultural reflections of the series can be interpreted through the multi-ethnic cast and its adapted setting in the UK as well as the rejection of traditional Chinese gender essentialism (Peng, 2022). Indeed, as a talented physicist, Ye Wenjie has her work stolen twice by different men who seek to present it as their own. It should be noted that there was also consideration of issues like cultural appropriation when making *3 Body Problem*, although that did not stop accusations of whitewashing upon the release of the show (Murray, 2024; Romano, 2024ii). However, the whole discourse surrounding the narrative, and its ideological positioning raises philosophical questions of how far modern issues can be filtered through the lessons of the past.

The show also explores the often problematic discourse between faith and science across cultural and political boundaries, offering differing commentary based on the constraints placed on communities at a given time. For instance, Ye Wenjie’s calculation that the sun could be used to amplify any signal sent into space is rejected by Commissar Lei Zhicheng (Deng Qiaozhi) as viable

when Yang Weining (Guming Yu) presents it as his own work, not on account of her status as a political prisoner, but as a consequence of the symbolism: “You want to aim a super-powerful radio beam at the Sun. At the Red Sun? Have you thought about the political symbolism of such an experiment? Who is the Red Sun in the heart of the People?” (S1 E2) The camera cutting to a picture of Chairman Mao illustrates who Commissar Lei is referring to, but his reaction also draws attention to the political and faith-based obstacles that constrains science and impedes progress where technological advancement conflicts with ideological sensibilities. Ye Wenjie implements her plan regardless of official opposition and does so in secret, but the implication is that progress is damaging to humanity because it is filtered through her perspective.

Ye Wenjie also becomes the site of conflict between faith and reason later on in the season, particularly when placed under interrogation by Wade (Liam Cunningham) (S1 E5). Ye Wenjie explains that she cannot Comprehend the decisions made by the San-Ti, but she knows that they are coming to save us from ourselves and that they are the only ones that can. Wade attempts to provoke her by warning that problems have begun with what “we” know, but she leans on her faith: “You’re here to shatter my belief, but it’s stronger than you are because they are stronger than you are.” Wade responds that “[y]ou’ve gone from ‘know’ to ‘believe’ in half a minute.” The distinction between faith and reason and that between religion and science is presented as paradoxical, foregrounding social issues that exist in reality, as Hutcheon (1990) notes. As such, attempting to reconcile the two in one individual presents a problem to be understood rather than solved.

On multiple occasions, characters grapple with existential questions related to their own humanity along with the quest for meaning in a world that is continually technologically advancing. One such scene features a conversation between Auggie and Raj Varma (Saamer Usmani), who is leading a mission to sink a ship, the Judgement Day, using her proprietary nanofibers (S1 E5). Auggie has reservations about the mission and questions the ethics of destroying the ship: “You want it to work... Even though you don’t know how many people we’re going to kill? You don’t know anything about them. You don’t know who they are, what their names are, or why they deserve to die.” Despite creating the technology to kill those on board, Auggie’s questions demonstrate an ethical stance that could potentially impede technological progress. In contrast, Raj considers them to be at war and accepts his orders without question. The debate sheds light on the ethical implications of developing technology that is harmful and of trusting that those using it are doing so for the right reasons. The camera cuts between Auggie and Raj’s faces, both of which are illuminated and so neither side of the debate is privileged. The audience is therefore invited to consider both points of view, at least until Auggie’s reservations are later vindicated when the nanofibers kill the children on board, who are wholly innocent, rather than targeting those who are considered to be enemies. We see children playing on board ripped to pieces, before Auggie comes across a child’s leg in the aftermath. The philosophical question is whether all is fair in war, and whether there is any hope for humanity when such atrocities are committed based on fear.

Furthermore, *3 Body Problem’s* treatment of religious beliefs and scientific rationalism is contradictory and yet reveals the problem that underpins Black’s (2002) assertion that there is no inherent tension between a scientific world view and that recognising truths beyond those knowable by science. This is an important facet of the ideological rather than narrative analysis because of the connotations of Mike Evans’s (Ben Schnetzer and Jonathan Pryce) interactions with Our Lord. Conversing with what is ostensibly a basic speaker, Evans refers to the female voice as “Lord”, which has religious symbolism in itself, but it also refers directly to how technologically advanced the San-Ti are in comparison to humans.

One discussion between Evans and Our Lord is particularly revealing in terms of how human nature is ethically problematic (S1 E4). Our Lord only deals in absolutes and truths because she has no predisposition to manipulating those truths, which stands in contrast to Evans. The back and forth between the two illuminates the ethical fibre of the San-Ti while contrasting it with what we know of humanity because the former does not know how to lie and asks questions that add a philosophical dimension to the allegory the series engages with through the fable of Little Red Riding Hood. Evans

reads the story to Our Lord and she begins to query why Little Red Riding Hood does not know the wolf intends to eat her. Curious, and after trying to explain the story multiple times, Evans asks “[c]an’t you ever say anything you know to be false? Can’t you lie?” It is revealed that the San-Ti cannot lie and neither can they understand the concept of fiction: “So the story, it is a lie about a liar?” They see fiction as an ethical breach that demonstrates the difficulty in reconciling faith (the story) and scientific rationalism (Our Lord’s absolutes). There is a tension between the two where coexistence is not accepted as rational, but rather is considered a threat where cultural difference inhibits understanding. The ideological disparity conveyed in this instance is difficult to decode because it seems absurd to us that fiction would not be accepted for what it is. However, it serves as a metaphor for ethical and cultural frameworks that cannot be reconciled.

## 5. Artificial Intelligence and Consciousness

The philosophical implications of the Trisolaran supercomputers that are presented as omniscient entities that empower the alien life form to destroy science are extensive and significant. Although they are not introduced until the fifth episode, they form the basis of the thematic concern of AI and the existential threat to humanity that it induces. It is worth returning to the work of Eisikovits (2023) here, particularly the idea that the threat posed by AI is philosophical because humans are judgement making creatures and its main danger to humanity lies in potential shifts in how people view themselves along with their experiences. When the supercomputer is introduced narratively, it brings together multiple philosophical questions and implications that are attached to AI and its ability to infiltrate humanity. The avatar in the video game explains that the San-Ti are using Sophons, or protons that are unfolded in high-dimension to become massive and form a sentient supercomputer, in order to disarm humans by killing science and preventing humanity as a whole from destroying the alien life form (S1 E5). The explanation is visualised through the effects of the game, with AI creating a representation of the process to demonstrate the threat sentient AI provides. The use of spectacle enhances the impact that making “a mind as large as a world” has and emphasises the importance of the science fiction genre in this respect. The spectacle also amplifies the overall message delivered: “We will destroy the science that could defeat us. The answers to your questions will become chaotic and meaningless. The universe will remain a mystery to you forever. In place of truth, we give you miracles. We wrap your world in illusions. We make you see what we want you to see.” This monologue provides the explanation for every anomaly or unexplained phenomenon that has happened in the series to that point, including the blinking stars, physics not working and the countdown that only Auggie could see. It also reinforces the distinction between faith and reason that becomes distorted through Ye Wenjie’s embodiment of both.

The ethical considerations associated with, and challenges posed by a sentient AI system are initially introduced through the virtual reality game that Jin and Jack play after Auggie finds the latter’s headset at his home (S1 E3). Linked to several suicides, the headset presents an ethical dilemma that stems directly from the use of the game as sentient AI. Auggie heavily objects to the use of the headset because the technology exceeds the capabilities of that accessible by humans and extends beyond their enhanced understanding: “That thing is hacking into your brain. You don’t even want an Alexa in your house, and you’re playing with that?” That Jin and Jack had uncritically accepted it as a game to be played without considering the implications of becoming embroiled in a virtual reality that is essentially beyond their comprehension and controls them is problematic, particularly the potential outcomes for their individual and collective consciousness. Within the game, they make judgements, as per Eisikovits (2023), but there is a relinquishing of control that Jin and Jack did not consider. This is a point that repeats throughout the show, with Jin in particular willing to relinquish control repeatedly to the multiple protagonists. This is amplified by Saul in this instance, who concurs with Auggie and asks the question most pertinent to the dilemma of playing the game versus its ethical implications regarding consciousness: “If it’s a direct neural interface, it’s controlling all sensory inputs and outputs. Everything that goes into your brain and everything that goes out. If it can exercise control at that level... is it possible that this thing was manipulating [Vera]

in some way?" Jin and Jack ignore both Saul and Auggie, but it is interesting to note that they are both predisposed to overriding the ethical concerns that their friend's flag in their quest for knowledge. Again, this reflects on the disparate ideological positioning of the Oxford Five and their respective beliefs on the nature of consciousness. The philosophical dimensions that are constructed through the relationships existing between the friends reflect self-consciousness through the human experience, with their distinct approaches to technology giving rise to questions of how far the quest for knowledge compromises that (Nietzsche, 2004; Chi, 2023).

The potential impact of sentient AI on humanity is bound up with ethics throughout the series and relates back to the work of Schmidt and Marratti (2008) through the argument that technology is not a source of potential catastrophe, but rather that social crises relate to the transformation of ethics brought about by technology and those who misuse it. Technology is extensively misused here through fear and anxiety, both of which induce an existential crisis that cannot be resolved through the constant quest for knowledge.

## 6. Discussion

The central argument of this paper, that *3 Body Problem* embraces the existential angst of humanity, is embedded within the narrative and ideological analyses performed here. The series offers extensive evidence to support the idea that philosophy can help humanity to make sense and meaning of even the most pressing crises, but that an ethical framework must be applied to decision making in order to ensure that humanity is retained. Indeed, this is the first of several key findings identified through the close textual analysis performed. Consciousness is a key component of existential thought, empowering humanity to reflect back on the evolution of society in relation to the constant quest for knowledge we have consistently embarked on throughout documented history. Nietzsche (2003) pointed to the modern conditions of anxiety, meaninglessness and alienation as indicative of the shift between the religious and the secular, but they are also fundamental parts of the human condition. As such, artificial intelligence provides a threat to consciousness where humanity allows it to and there is a need to maintain autonomy free from technological interference. The role of technology in society must therefore necessarily be limited based on philosophical thought as well as practical need.

Secondly, faith and reason are not mutually exclusive, but there is a tension that exists between the two that drives an ostensible ongoing conflict. Ye Wenjie embodied the struggle between the two; a woman of science and yet a human who believed in a higher power she thought to be humanity's saviour. The two offer significant contradictions, but the ongoing attempt at reconciliation supports the contention that the show embraces existential angst rather than considering it harmful. Wrestling with larger questions is important for our philosophical understanding of the human condition, and that begins with faith and reason.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, an ethical framework underpins all of the decisions made in *3 Body Problem*, although it is difficult to decipher every aspect of the ethical considerations that run throughout the show. Existentialist theory is based on the premise that we can only lead a moral life through owning our freedom and taking responsibility for our choices (Aho, 2023). It can be argued that very few characters actually take responsibility for their choices and only concern themselves with certain freedoms. The spectrum on which such decisions lie narrows as the series progresses and so the show raises questions of who is deserving of consideration during social and political crises. Of course, the notion of "deserving" is loaded, but then so is the ethical framework humanity considers fixed through religion. Again, *3 Body Problem* introduces the cyclical nature of the human experience, debates concerning which are conducted through the Oxford Five's disparate ideological positions.

The broader philosophical implications of the series relate to the development of understanding of humanity's place in the universe insofar as the three findings outlined here are concerned. Despite the need to safeguard human judgement that underpins existential thought, despite the need to safeguard human judgement that underpins existential thought, the show does not offer judgement

of its characters. Instead, it presents the decisions they make uncritically and allows other characters to offer counterpoints that the audience can consider before forming their own opinions. As such, the philosophical implications of the show reside in the freedom it gives its characters and demand further scrutiny when further seasons are released.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this close textual analysis of *3 Body Problem* has revealed extensive philosophical questions that frame its remit as a visual exploration of existentialism, of the conflict between faith and reason and of the possibilities that science and technology introduce when ethical frameworks are ignored or manipulated to suit the needs of those who pursue knowledge. Although the series is limited in scope at the moment, with further seasons to follow, it establishes a narrative through which humanity can be explored. Therefore, ultimately, this paper offers extensive evidence to support the original thesis that *3 Body Problem* embraces the existential angst of humanity as it becomes entangled with questions of faith and reason where science and technology begin to encroach on the human experience.

Faith and reason are often deemed incompatible because it tends to be understood as religion versus science, but the philosophical filter that is applied by Benioff and Weiss in *3 Body Problem* reflects on far more complex questions that are multifaceted and delve into the tensions between what is knowable and what is unknowable. The existential anxieties and threats that begin to emerge through what really is a complex narrative are all derived from the human quest for knowledge through science and technology. However, the nature of the show itself means that it reflects that quest, embraces it and tries to do more than its science fiction predecessors. Further analysis would be required to demonstrate this to the fullest possible extent, but narrowing the scope of research to its philosophical dimensions in the context of existentialism has been useful in making an effective start on commentary.

The series' lasting impact directly relates to its contribution to philosophical discourse because there is no judgement of any of the parties who contribute to the narrative. There is no expectation that the audience will side with a given party, with each character being profoundly flawed with weaknesses that leave them susceptible to questions being asked of their motivations and the extent to which their experiences are typical of humanity. They all contribute to the philosophical engagement of the series, particularly the questions asked of humanity as custodians of the past, present and future. While existentialism provides one philosophical lens through which *3 Body Problem* can be interpreted and understood, there are further ethical questions that must be asked of science and technology. *3 Body Problem* therefore offers an insight into the existential angst of humanity and the need to consider the implications that further technological advancements and scientific achievements present for the human experience.

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