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**We Have to Live Till We Die <sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

What ethical stance would be appropriate in today's messy situation of health crisis, global warming, social and economic antagonisms, etc.? The first one is that of an expert who deals with the specific task imposed on him by those in power, blissfully ignoring the wider social context of his activity. The second one is that of pseudo-radical intellectuals who criticize the existing order from a comfortable morally superior position, well aware that their criticism will have no actual effects. How, then, are we to go on living after we get rid of the illusions of a false critical stance? Not just by accepting our reality: the fascination with the end of our civilization make us spectators who morbidly enjoy the disintegration of normality. A way out of this deadlock is signalled by a line from a song by the German rock band Rammstein: "we have to live till we die". We have to fight against the pandemic and other crises not by way of withdrawing from life but as a way to live with utmost intensity. Is there anyone more ALIVE today than millions of healthcare workers who with full awareness risk their lives on a daily base? Many of them died, but till they died they were alive.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Expert, Cynicism, Survival, Death.

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## Introduction

Towards the beginning of his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel speaks about the three basic stances of thinking towards objectivity (“*drei Stellungen des Gedankens zur Objektivität*”). To deal with the basic ethical dilemmas today, it seems appropriate to me to describe the three basic stances of today’s intellectuals towards the topsy-turvy mess we’re in.

The first stance is that of an expert who deals with the specific task imposed on him by those in power, blissfully ignoring the wider social context of his activity. Philip K. Dick’s sci-fi novel *Time out of Joint* (published back in 1959) provides an extreme version of such a constellation. It tells the story<sup>2</sup> of Ragle Gumm who (thinks he) lives in 1959 in a quiet American suburb; his unusual profession consists of repeatedly winning the cash prize in a local newspaper contest called “Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next”. As the novel opens, strange things begin to happen to Gumm: a soft-drink stand disappears, replaced by a small slip of paper with the words “SOFT-DRINK STAND” printed on it in block letters, plus other anomalies occur which signal that Gumm lives in an artificial world. A neighborhood woman invites him to a civil defense class where he sees a model of a futuristic underground military factory – Gumm has the unshakeable feeling he’s been inside that building many times before... Confusion gradually mounts for Gumm, and the deception surrounding him (erected to protect and exploit him) begins to unravel: he learns that his idyllic town is a constructed reality designed to protect him from the frightening fact that he really lives in 1998 when the Earth is at war against lunar colonists who are fighting for a permanent lunar settlement, politically independent from Earth.

Gumm has a unique ability to predict where the colonists’ nuclear strikes will be aimed. Previously Gumm did this work for the military, but then he defected to the colonists’ side and planned to secretly emigrate to the Moon. But before this could happen, he began retreating into a fantasy world based largely upon the relatively idyllic surroundings of his extreme youth. He was no longer able to shoulder his responsibility as Earth’s lone protector from Lunar-launched nuclear offensives. The fake town was thereby created within Gumm’s mind to accommodate and rationalize his retreat to childhood so that he could continue

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2. The following resume shamelessly relies on the “Time Out of Joint” entry in Wikipedia.

predicting nuclear strikes in the guise of submitting entries to a harmless newspaper contest and without the ethical qualms involved with being on the "wrong" side of a civil war. When Gumm finally remembers his true personal history, he decides to emigrate to the Moon after all because he feels that exploration and migration should never be denied to people by any government.

Gumm's predicament echoes perfectly the role of today's scientists who work for the intelligence and military establishment: most of them live in an artificial idyllic space of campuses or rich suburbia protected from the mess of contemporary life, and, from their standpoint, their work appears as a playful effort to resolve mathematical riddles, while the establishment uses their work to assert social control and strengthen military force. In the novel, Gumm succeeds in breaking out of his secluded world and acquiring a critical stance that enables him to get politically engaged – but there are critical stances and critical stances, i.e., a "radical" critical stance contains its own traps. In their "Nunca quedas mal con nadie" ("You never make a bad impression"), the Chilean band *Los Prisioneros* provide the perfect in image of a fake "radical" Leftist – here are some parts of the lyrics:

"Do you think you protest? / Do you think you're some kind of rebel? / You complain about pollution / You talk about automatization / You defend humanity / you cry because the world is so bad / You critique society / you say everything should change / On the stage, you folklorize your voice / 'down with the city and it's contamination' / with your cute melodies and romantic sympathy / you never make a bad impression on anyone / You tell me you protest / But...! / Your position doesn't bother anyone / Is your goal to attack something, or just win applause? / You complain about the bombs / and say they will be the end of the world / But you never give any names, / you're afraid to make a bad impression / you think you're revolutionary and controversial / But you never make a bad impression / You're a bad copy of some hippie gringo / your position, listen, you stupid beardy / sold itself to the applause of the cheesy conscious people / You contradict all of your famous protest / with your complicated and beautiful melodies / You pretend to fight... / but you're just a nice piece of shit!"<sup>3</sup>

Although this song evokes a figure which is part of the situation in Chile, its

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3. <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nunca-quedas-mal-con-nadie-you-never-make-bad-impression.html>.

relevance is global. I often talked about how, on today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: virtual sex as sex without sex, the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of other deprived of its disturbing Otherness. *Los Prisonieros* add another key figure from our cultural space to this series: a *decaffeinated protester*. A protester who says (or sings) all the right things, but somehow deprives them of their critical edge. He is horrified by global warming, he fights sexism and racism, he demands a radical social change, and everyone is invited to join in, to participate in the big sentiment of global solidarity, which means: you are not required to change your life (maybe just give a charity here and there), you go on with your career, you are ruthlessly competitive, but you are on the right side.

In his preface to *Animal Farm*, George Orwell wrote that if liberty means anything it means “the right to tell people what they do not want to hear” – this is what the decaffeinated protester never does: he gives to his public what they WANT to hear. And what is this? The predominant attitude among academic “radical Leftists” is still the one that, back in 1937, George Orwell deployed apropos class difference: “We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed” (Orwell, 1937). Orwell's point is that radicals invoke the need for revolutionary change as a kind of superstitious token that should achieve the opposite, i.e., PREVENT the change from really occurring – like today's academic Leftist who criticizes capitalist cultural imperialism but is in reality horrified at the idea that his field of study would really break down. That's why we need bands like *Los Prisonieros* to confront our truth with all the ruthless brutality that is required – we should gather the courage to GIVE NAMES to the evils that beset us.

Let's take a recent example from another part of the world of how “you contradict all of your famous protest / with your complicated and beautiful melodies” In January 2020, Jerusalem mayor Moshe Leon invited participants of the World Holocaust Forum to a one-of-a-kind cocktail party with a DJ in a cave

underneath the Old City<sup>4</sup> - in our topsy-turvy world where obscenities are more and more a part of our daily public life, such an event is obviously considered an appropriate conclusion to the commemoration of holocaust... No wonder that only days separated this event from the unveiling of Trump's Middle East peace plan, another obscenity – a proposal for peace between the two parties of which only one was consulted and the other was ignored.

Carlo Ginzburg proposed the notion that a shame for one's country, not love of it, may be the true mark of belonging to it (See: Ginzburg, 2019, pp. 35-44). A supreme example of such shame occurred back in 2014 when hundreds of Holocaust survivors and descendants of survivors bought an ad in Saturday's *New York Times* condemning what they referred to as "the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza and the ongoing occupation and colonization of historic Palestine": "We are alarmed by the extreme, racist dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli society, which has reached a fever-pitch," said the statement.<sup>5</sup> Maybe, today, some Israelis will gather the courage to feel shame apropos Netanyahu and Trump politics done on their behalf – not, of course, in the sense of shame of being Jewish but, on the contrary, of feeling shame for what the Israeli politics in the West Bank is doing to the most precious legacy of Judaism itself. This is what *Los Prisioneros* are telling us, not only with "Nunca quedas mal con nadie" but with many other songs: sometimes, being ashamed of your country is the only way to fully belong to it and to fight for it.

What, then, would have been a third stance towards the madness of the topsy-turvy world of ours, a stance which allows us to avoid the traps of the critical stance without falling back into the assertion of reality as it is? Or, in more ethical terms, how are we to go on living after we get rid of the illusions of a critical stance? In his last book *La catastrophe ou la vie*,<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy, THE theorist of (ecological, economic, etc.) catastrophes, collected his reflections on the pandemic. At the beginning of the book, he describes the challenge that the pandemic presents to his

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4. See <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-j-lem-mayor-invites-holocaust-forum-attendees-to-cocktail-party-complete-with-dj-1.8414774>.

5. See <https://observer.com/2014/08/ny-times-runs-ad-from-holocaust-survivors-condemning-israel-attacking-elie-wiesel/>.

6. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La catastrophe ou la vie*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2021.

own theory of the impact of catastrophes. In this theory, he takes as a starting point Henri Bergson who, in his *“Two Sources of Morality and Religion”*, describes the strange sensations he experienced on August 4 1914 when the war was declared between France and Germany. Crucial is here the modality of the break between before and after: before its outburst, the war appeared to Bergson *“simultaneously probable and impossible: a complex and contradictory notion which persisted to the end”* (Bergson, 1991, pp. 1110-1111); after its outburst, it all of a sudden become real AND possible, and the paradox resides in this retroactive appearance of probability:

“I never pretended that one can insert reality into the past and thus work backwards in time. However, one can without any doubt insert there the possible, or, rather, at every moment, the possible insert itself there. Insofar as unpredictable and new reality creates itself, its image reflects itself behind itself in the indefinite past: this new reality finds itself all the time having been possible; but it is only at the precise moment of its actual emergence that it *begins to always have been*, and this is why I say that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once this reality emerges” (Bergson, 1991, p. 1340).

Before the outburst of the war, people (the public) knew well there is the threat of a military conflict, but they didn't really believe it can happen, i.e., they considered the war impossible. The paradox is here that, in our everyday epistemology, knowledge is considered higher (stronger) than belief: you believe something that you don't fully know, and full knowledge should automatically entail belief – in Bergson's case, however, you have knowledge without belief. Once the war exploded, our stance was quickly and automatically renormalized: the war was accepted as possible. The paradox is that actuality precedes and grounds possibility: once a thing considered impossible actually happens, it becomes possible.

With the pandemic, however, things proceeded (almost) in the opposite direction: before the pandemic exploded, its possibility, inevitability even, was widely discussed, everybody was counting with it, and one can even surmise that this knowledge was not accompanied by a lack of belief. So the viral catastrophe was held possible as long as it was just foretold, but when it really hit us, we (many of us) couldn't really bring us to believe in it, it was not “normalized” but perceived as impossible, disavowed in different modalities (outright denial, conspiracy theory, ...). One should bear in mind here the aspect of temporality: when we talk

about big catastrophes (epidemics, global warming, etc.), even in a mode of panic, we as a rule locate them in a not too near future (a decade or so) – “if we don't act now, soon it will be too late” –, or we at least we locate the catastrophe in a far away region (corals in the north of Australia are disappearing, glaciers are melting...). However, the pandemic, it just happened, it hit us with full power and almost brought our social life to a standstill.

What existential stance does such a situation imply? The central refrain of Rammstein's “Dalai Lama” is: “Weiter, weiter ins Verderben / Wir müssen leben bis wir sterben” (“Further, further into ruin / We have to live till we die”). This stance is the proper one to adopt today when the pandemic reminded all of us of our finitude and mortality, on how our life depends on an obscure interplay of (what appears to us as) contingencies. As we experience it almost daily, the true problem is not that we may die but that life just drags on in uncertainty, causing permanent depression, the loss of the will to go on. The fascination with total catastrophe and with the end of our civilization make us spectators who morbidly enjoy the disintegration of normality; this fascination is often fed by a false feeling of guilt (the pandemic as a punishment for our decadent way of life, etc.). Now, with the promise of the vaccine and the spread of new variants of the virus, we live in an endlessly postponed breakdown. Notice how the temporal frame of the way out is changing: in the Spring, authorities most often mentioned two weeks (“after two weeks, it should get better”); then, in the Fall of 2020, it was two months; now, it is mostly half a year (in the Summer of 2021, maybe even later, things will get better); voices are already heard which postpone the end of the pandemic to 2022, even 2024... Every day brings news – vaccines work against new variants, or maybe not; the Russian Sputnik is not good, but now it seems it works quite well; there are big delays in the supply of vaccines, but most of us will still get vaccinated till Summer... these endless oscillations obviously also generate a pleasure of their own, making it easier for us to survive the misery of our lives.

As in “Dalai Lama,” Covid-19 is the turbulence which shattered our daily lives. What provoked the rage of today's god's? They were offended by our biogenetic manipulations and destruction of environment – but who is the Dalai Lama in our reality? For Giorgio Agamben and many protesters against lockdown and social distancing, the Dalai Lama who pretends to protect us but in reality suffocates our

social freedoms are these very protective measures. Agamben recently wrote a short poem *Si è abolito l'amore* which makes his position clear:

“If love is abolished / in the name of health / then health will also be abolished.

If freedom is abolished / in the name of medicine / then medicine will also be abolished.

If God is abolished / in the name of reason / then reason will also be abolished.

If man is abolished / in the name of life / then life will also be abolished.

If truth is abolished / in the name of information / information will not be abolished.

If constitution is abolished / in the name of emergency / emergency will not be abolished”.<sup>7</sup>

Everything is wrong with this variations on the same wisdom. First, the last two exceptions are wrong: if truth is abolished information will also be abolished because information only functions against the background of a truth, of a horizon which determines how we understand information; if constitution is abolished then emergency will also be abolished because emergency will no longer be that but a new normality. Second, the symmetry of the first four lines is false. Love in its radical sense IS unhealthy, falling in love is a traumatic cut that disturbs the balance of our daily life – so it is love itself which already abolishes health. If medicine is abolished on behalf of freedom, the only freedom that remains is the freedom to die. God and reason: what reason? There is a notion of reason which doesn't need god but is far from the common naturalist determinism – just thing about quantum physics... And what God? Agamben wrote: “What would a God be to whom neither prayers nor sacrifices were addressed?” As Lacanians, we should turn the question around: what would a sacrifice be which is not addressed to a god? Is there a sacrifice which does presuppose some figure of the big Other? Again, Lacan's answer is: yes, the sacrifice called “symbolic castration,” a sacrifice which is itself a positive act, a gesture that opens up the space for new wealth. And, finally, man and life: is today the danger not rather in abolishing life on behalf of man, of a certain notion of human dignity and freedom (like the ethics of war) that can lead to total self-destruction?

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7. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-si-bolito-l-amore>.



In a critical move against Agamben who sees in the measures against the pandemic a mere continuation of the state of exception, Zsuzsa Barros formulated in a simple but precise way the difference between the standard notion of the state of exception and the state of exception triggered by the pandemic: “The state of exception (if this term still applies) in the case of this ‘novel’ virus is not the exercise of power over life as bare life but, on the contrary, an extreme (exceptional) self-defensive measure and immune reaction by the political body to an invading life form that is not even properly alive” (Op.cit., p. 60). In the case of the pandemic, it is not the state authority which invaded civil society, submitting it to a total control; it is an invading life form (or, rather, not even a true form of life but just a self-reproducing chemical mechanism) which invaded and disturbed the political body, throwing it into a panic and rendering visible its impotence.

Agamben’s basic claim is that if we accept the measures against the pandemic we thereby abandon the open social space as the core of our being-human and turn into isolated survival-machines controlled by science and technology.<sup>8</sup> So even when our house is on fire, we should gather the courage to go on with life as normal and eventually die with dignity:

“‘Nothing I’m doing makes any sense if the house is on fire.’ Yet even when the house is on fire it is necessary to continue as before, to do everything with care and precision, perhaps even more so than before—even if no one notices. Perhaps life itself will disappear from the face of the earth, perhaps no memory whatsoever will remain of what has been done, for better or for worse. But you continue as before, it is too late to change, there is no time anymore” (Agamben, October 27th, 2020).

(One should note an ambiguity in Agamben’s line of argumentation: is “the house on fire” our reality due to the pandemic, global warming, etc., or is our house on fire because of the way we (over) reacted to the reality of pandemic? “Today the flame has changed its form and nature, it has become digital, invisible and cold—but precisely for this very reason it is even closer still and surrounds us at every moment”). Does this mean that we should resign ourselves to the loss of humanity and forget the social freedoms we are used to? Even if we ignore the fact that these freedoms were actually much more limited than it may appear, the paradox is that

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8. See his latest statement in: <https://illwilleditions.com/when-the-house-is-on-fire/>.

only by way of passing through the zero-point of this disappearance can we keep the space open for the new freedoms-to-come: if we stick to our old way of life, we will for sure end in new barbarism. In the US and Europe, the new barbarians are precisely those who violently protest against anti-pandemic measures on behalf of the personal freedom and dignity – those like Jared Kushner, back in April, bragged that Trump was taking the country “back from the doctors”.<sup>9</sup> Sergio Benvenuto formulated succinctly the obscenity of the idea that the protective measures against the pandemic demand from us to great a sacrifice of forsaking basic human rights: “To consider this sacrifice as unbearable, when there are those who are risking their lives in hospitals to save ours, is not only offensive; it is ridiculous” (Castrillón & Marchevsky, 2021, p. 95). However, one should note that in the very last paragraph of his text, Agamben leaves open the possibility that a new form of post-human spirituality will emerge:

“Man disappears today, like a face in the sand erased on the shore. But what takes its place no longer has a world, only a naked life, silent and without history, at the mercy of the calculations of power and science. But perhaps it is only starting from this destruction that something else may one day slowly or suddenly appear — not a god, of course, but not even another man — a new animal, perhaps, an otherwise living soul” (Agamben, 5 October, 2020).

Agamben, of course, refers here to the famous last lines of Michel Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses* (1966): “As the archaeology of our thought shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. /.../ one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” So what will appear in the ashes of humanity we were accustomed to? From the Hegelian standpoint, the answer is clear: subject itself, the non-human core obfuscated by the ultimate mask called “human face.” What this means is that, back to the threat of pandemic, one can also argue the exact opposite: is the stance advocated by Agamben – let’s stick to our social life as usual – also not a seductive voice of angels which we should resist? To put it in Agamben’s own words: “If medicine is abolished in the name of freedom, then freedom will also be abolished. If life is abolished in the name of man, then man will also be abolished.”

Rammstein’s “we have to live till we die” outlines a way out of this deadlock: to

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9. See <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/28/politics/woodward-kushner-coronavirus-doctors/index.html>.

fight against the pandemic not by way of withdrawing from life but as a way to live with utmost intensity. Is there anyone more ALIVE today than millions of healthcare workers who with full awareness risk their lives on a daily base? Many of them died, but *till they died they were alive*. They do not just sacrifice themselves for us, getting our hypocritical praise. And they are even less survival machines reduced to bare life - they are those who are today most alive.

### **Conclusion**

The predominant form of thinking pandemic, is a combination of predictable motifs: in pandemic not only our social and economic tensions exploded, the pandemic also reminded us that we are part of nature, not its center, so we have to change our way of life - limit our individualism, develop new solidarity and accept our modest place in the life on our earth. But is it not that global warming and other ecological threats demand of us collective interventions into our environment which will be incredibly powerful, direct interventions into the fragile balance of forms of life? When we say that the rise of average temperature has to be kept below 2 degrees Celsius, we talk (and try to act) as general managers of life on earth, not as a modest species. The regeneration of the earth obviously does not depend upon “our smaller and more mindful role” – it depends upon our gigantic role which is the truth beneath all the talk about our finitude and mortality. What we get here is the extreme form of the gap at work already in modern science and subjectivity: modern science and subjectivity which aim at mastering nature are strictly co-dependent with the vision of humanity as just another species on the earth. If we have to care also about the life of water and air, it means precisely that we are what Marx called “universal beings,” as it were able to step outside ourselves, stand on our own shoulders, and perceive ourselves as a minor moment of the natural totality. In premodern times when humanity perceived itself as the crown of creation, this paradoxically implied a much more modest stance.

This is the paradox we have to sustain in these crazy days: to accept that we are one among the species on earth, and simultaneously to think and act as universal beings. To escape into the comfortable modesty of our finitude and mortality is not an option, it is a path to catastrophe.

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