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From catastrophe to apocalypse... and back

When I visited Heidelberg for the first time, I was told that Martin Heidegger once took a walk on the famous *Philosophenweg,* slipped on a sharp turn, and ingloriously fell down. My intervention here can also be taken as a comment on another slip of Heidegger's, the one that happened on his *Holzweg* as a thinker. It concerns precisely our topic, the topic of apocalypse, catastrophe, and the end of history.

We live now in a weird moment where multiple catastrophes — pandemic, global warming, social tensions, and the prospect of full digital control over our thinking — compete for primacy, not just quantitatively but also in the sense of which of them will count as the 'quilting point' (Lacan's *point-de-capiton*) which totalizes all others. The main candidate in the public discourse is, today, global warming, while lately the antagonism which, in our part of the world, at least, appears as the crucial one is the one between partisans of vaccination and vaccine-sceptics. The problem is here that, for the Covid-sceptics, the main catastrophe is today the fake vision of the (pandemic) catastrophe itself which is manipulated by those in power to strengthen social control and economic exploitation. If one takes a closer look at how the struggle against vaccination condenses other struggles (struggle against state control, struggle against science, struggle against corporate economic exploitation, and the struggle for the defense of our way of life), it becomes clear that this key role of the struggle against vaccination is the outcome of an ideological mystification in some aspects even similar to anti-Semitism: in the same way that anti-Semitism is a displaced-mystified form of anti-capitalism, the struggle against vaccination is also a displaced-mystified form of class struggle against those in power.

To find a way in this mess, we should maybe mobilize the distinction between apocalypse and catastrophe, reserving the term 'catastrophe'

for what Günther Anders called "naked apocalypse." Apocalypse, "an uncovering" in Ancient Greek, is a disclosure or revelation of knowledge; in religious speech, what apocalypse discloses is something hidden, the ultimate truth we are blind for in our ordinary lives. Today we commonly refer to any larger-scale catastrophic event or chain of detrimental events to humanity or nature as 'apocalyptic'. Although it is easy to imagine the apocalypse-disclosure without the apocalypse-catastrophe (say, a religious revelation) and the apocalypse-catastrophe without the apocalypse-disclosure (say, an earthquake destroying an entire continent), there is an inner link between the two dimensions: when we (think that we) confront some higher and hitherto hidden truth, this truth is so different from our common opinions that it has to shatter our world, and vice versa; every catastrophic event, even if purely natural, reveals something ignored in our normal existence, puts us face to face with an oppressed truth.

In his essay *Apocalypse without Kingdom*, Anders introduced the concept of '*naked apocalypse*': "the apocalypse that consists of mere downfall, which doesn't represent the opening of a new, positive state of affairs (of the 'kingdom')." Anders's idea was that a nuclear catastrophe would be precisely such a naked apocalypse: no new kingdom will arise out of it, just the obliteration of ourselves and our world. And the question we should raise today is: what kind of apocalypse is announced in the plurality of catastrophes that today pose a threat to all of us? Let's begin with the obvious candidate: what kind of apocalypse announces itself by the prospect of full digitalization of our lives?

When the threat posed by the digitalization is debated in our media, the focus is usually on the new phase of capitalism called, by Shoshana Zuboff, 'surveillance capitalism': "Knowledge, authority and power rest with surveillance capital, for which we are merely 'human natural resources'. We are the native peoples now whose claims to self-determination have vanished from the maps of our own experience." We, the watched, are not just material, we are also exploited, involved in an unequal exchange, which is why the term 'behavioural surplus' (playing the role of surplus-value) is fully justified here: when we are surfing, buying, watching TV, etc., we get what we want, but we give more; we lay ourselves bare, we make the details of our life and its habits transparent to the digital big Other. The paradox is, of course, that we experience this unequal exchange, the activity which effectively enslaves us, as our highest exercise of freedom; what is more free than freely surfing on the web? Just by exerting this freedom of ours, we generate the 'surplus' appropriated by the digital big Other which collects data.

However, as important as this 'surveillance capitalism' is, it is not yet the true game changer. I see a much greater potential for new forms of domination in the prospect of direct brain-machine interface which is today's main candidate for the end of history: after it will take place, the rest will not be history; at least not history as we knew it and experienced it. The distance between our inner life, the line of our thoughts, and external reality is the basis of the perception of ourselves as free: we are free in our thoughts precisely insofar as they are at a distance from reality, so that we can play with them, make thought-experiments, engage in dreaming, with no direct consequences in reality, no one can control us there. Once our inner life is directly linked to reality so that our thoughts have direct consequences in reality (or can be directly regulated by a machine that is part of reality) and are in this sense no longer 'ours', we effectively enter a post-human state.

We regularly hear complaints about the digital virtualization of our reality, of how we are losing contact with authentic reality, sex included. If we talk about material reality, it is mostly about exhaustion; the growing *shortage* of natural resources. But there is also the opposite: the excess, the exploding *abundance*, of waste in all its forms, from millions of tons of plastic waste circulating in oceans to air pollution. The name for this surplus is 'emissions'. What is emitted is a surplus which cannot be 'recycled' and reintegrated into the circulation of nature, a surplus which persists as an 'unnatural' remainder growing ad infinitum and thereby destabilized the 'finitude' of nature and its resources. This 'waste' is the material counterpart of homeless refugees which form a kind of 'human waste' (waste, of course, from the standpoint of capital's global circulation).

The conclusion that imposes itself here is: what if apocalypse in the full sense of the term which includes the disclosure of hitherto invisible truth never happens? What if truth is something that is '*stiftet*' (constructed) afterwards, as an essay to make sense of the catastrophe? Some would argue that the disintegration of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1990 was an authentic apocalypse: it brought out the truth that Socialism doesn't work, that liberal democracy is the finally discovered best possible socio-economic system. But this Fukuyama dream of the end of history ended with a crude awakening a decade later, on September 11, so that we live today in an era that is best characterized as the end of the end—the circle is closed, we passed from catastrophe to apocalypse and then back to catastrophe. We hear again and again that we are at the end of history, but this end just drags on and even brings its own sense of enjoyment.

Our usual notion of catastrophe is that it takes place when the intrusion of some brutal real—earthquake, war, etc.—ruins the symbolic

fiction which is our reality. But, perhaps there is no less a catastrophe when reality remains as it is and just the symbolic fiction that sustains our approach to reality dissolves. Let's take the case of sexuality, since nowhere do fictions play a more crucial role than in sexuality. In an interesting comment on the role of consent in sexual relations, Eva Wiseman (2019) refers to "a moment in *The Butterfly Effect*, Jon Ronson's podcast series about internet porn. On the set of a porn film an actor lost his erection mid-scene; to coax it back, he turned away from the woman, naked below him, grabbed his phone and searched Pornhub. Which struck me as vaguely apocalyptic"; note the word "apocalypse" here. Wiseman concludes: "Something is rotten in the state of sex". I agree, but I would add the lesson of psychoanalysis: human sexuality is in itself perverted, exposed to sadomasochist reversals and, specifically, to the mixture of reality and fantasy. Even when I am alone with my partner, my (sexual) interaction with him/her is inextricably intertwined with my fantasies, i.e. every sexual interaction is potentially structured like "masturbation with a real partner" (Wiseman 2019). I use the flesh and body of my partner as a prop to realize/enact my fantasies. We cannot reduce this gap between the bodily reality of my partner and the universe of fantasies to a distortion opened up by patriarchy and social domination or exploitation: the gap is here from the very beginning. So I quite understand the actor who, in order to regain an erection, searched through Pornhub: He was looking for a fantasmatic support of his performance.

Such a loss of fiction is what happened to the hardcore actor who needed Pornhub images to sustain his sex activity. However, one can also imagine a non-catastrophic dissolution of symbolic fiction which simply liberates us from the hold of fantasies. When, towards the beginning of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, the heroine returns home from wandering around the garden early in the morning, she answers the Nurse's query "Where were you?" with: "Nowhere. It was beautiful. The whole world was grey when I went out. And now—you wouldn't recognize it. It's like a postcard: all pink, and green, and yellow. You'll have to get up earlier, Nurse, if you want to see the world without colors. /.../ The garden was lovely. It was still asleep. Have you ever thought how lovely a garden is when it is not yet thinking of men? /.../ The fields were wet. They were waiting for something to happen. The whole world was breathless, waiting" (Anouilh 1946). One should read these lines closely: when Antigone sees the world in gray, before the sunshine transforms it into a postcard kitsch, she didn't see the world the way it was before her eyes saw it, she saw the world *before the world returned the gaze on her*. In Lacan's terms, while walking around the garden before sunlight Antigone was looking at the world before the

world was returning the gaze. Maybe, this is what Hegel meant when he wrote that philosophy paints reality grey on grey.

This brings us to another apocalyptic end, the long-foretold end of philosophy. Today, we have TWO ends of philosophy, the one in positive science occupying the field of old metaphysical speculations, and the one announced by Heidegger who brought the transcendental approach to its radical conclusion, reducing philosophy to the description of the historical "events"; modes of disclosure of Being. In the last decades, technological progress in experimental physics has opened up a new domain, unthinkable in the classical scientific universe, that of the "experimental metaphysics" suggesting that "questions previously thought to be a matter solely for philosophical debate have been brought into the orbit of empirical inquiry" (Barad 2007, 35). What was till now the topic of "mental experiments" is gradually becoming the topic of actual laboratory experiments: exemplary here is the famous Einstein-Rosen-Podolsky double split experiment, first just imagined, then actually performed by Alain Aspect. The properly 'metaphysical' propositions tested are the ontological status of contingency, the locality-condition of causality, the status of reality independent of our observation, etc. This is why, at the very beginning of his *The Grand Design,* Stephen Hawking triumphantly proclaims that "philosophy is dead" (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010, 5). With the latest advances in quantum physics and cosmology, the so-called experimental metaphysics reaches its apogee: metaphysical questions about the origins of the universe, etc., which were till now the topic of philosophical speculations, can now be answered through experimental science and thus be empirically tested. The prospect of a 'wired brain' is a kind of final point of the naturalization of human thought: when our process of thinking can directly interact with a digital machine, it effectively becomes an object in reality, it is no longer "our" inner thought as opposed to external reality.

On the other hand, with today's transcendental historicism, 'naïve' questions about reality are accepted precisely as 'naïve', which means they cannot provide the ultimate cognitive frame of our knowledge. For example, Foucault's notion of truth can be summed up in the claim that truth/untruth is not a direct property of our statements but that, in different historical conditions, different discourses produce each its own specific truth-effect, i.e., it implies its own criteria of what values as "true":

> The problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how

> effects of truth are produced within discourses which are neither true nor false. (Foucault 1980, 118)

Science defines truth in its own terms: the truth of a proposition (which should be formulated in clear explicit and preferably formalized terms) is established by experimental procedures which could be repeated by anyone. Religious discourse operates in a different way: its "truth" is established through complex rhetorical ways which generate the experience of inhabiting a meaningful world benevolently controlled by a higher power. So, if one were to ask Michel Foucault a big metaphysical question, like "Do we have a free will?", his answer would have been something like: "This question only has meaning, it can only be raised within a certain episteme; field of knowledge/power which determines under what conditions it is true or false, and all we can ultimately do is describe this episteme." For Foucault, this episteme is, in what in German is called *Unhintergehbares*, something behind which we cannot reach.

In a similar vein, Heidegger's typical move when confronted with the prospect of a catastrophe is to move back from the ontic level to its ontological horizon. In the 1950s, when we were all haunted by the prospect of a nuclear war, Heidegger wrote that the true danger is not the actual nuclear war but the disclosure of Being in which scientific domination over nature is what matters; only within this horizon can an eventual nuclear self-destruction take place. To parody his jargon, one might say that the essence of a catastrophe is the catastrophe of/in the essence itself. Such an approach seems to me too short: it ignores the fact that the eventual self-destruction of humanity would simultaneously annihilate *Da-Sein* as the only site of the disclosure of Being.

These two approaches, scientific and transcendental, do not complement each other, they are mutually exclusive, but the immanent insufficiency of each of them opens up the space for the other: science cannot close the circle and ground in its object or the approach it uses when analyzing its object, only transcendental philosophy can do that. Transcendental philosophy, which limits itself to describing different disclosures of Being, has to ignore the ontic question (how do entities exist outside of the horizon of their appearing to us), and science fills in this void with its claims about the nature of things. Is this parallax the ultimate stand of our thinking, or can we reach beyond (or, rather, beneath) it?

Although Heidegger is the ultimate transcendental philosopher, there are mysterious passages where he ventures into this pre-transcendental domain. In the elaboration of this notion of an untruth /*lethe*/ older than the very dimension of truth, Heidegger emphasizes how man's "stepping

into the essential unfolding of truth" is a "transformation of the being of man in the sense of a derangement /*Ver-rueckung*—going mad/ of his position among beings" (Heidegger, 1975, 338). The 'derangement' to which Heidegger refers is, of course, not a psychological or clinical category of madness: it signals a much more radical, properly ontological reversal/aberration, when, in its very foundation, the universe itself is in a way 'out of joint' and thrown off its rails. Among great philosophers, Schelling and Hegel clearly saw this dimension. For Hegel madness is not an accidental lapse, distortion, or "illness" of human spirit, but something which is inscribed into an individual spirit's basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

> This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that *every* mind, *every* soul, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the *Philosophy of Right* crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for *every* individual. Crime and insanity are *extremes* which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development. (Hegel 1817, par. 408)

Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of human mind: it is something whose threat has to be overcome if we are to emerge as "normal" subjects, which means that "normality" can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. In short, we do not all have to be mad in reality, but madness is the real of our psychic lives, a point to which our psychic lives necessarily refer in order to assert themselves as "normal." We must also remember that Heidegger wrote the lines on madness in the years of his intensive reading of Schelling's *Treatise on Human Freedom*, a text which discerns the origin of Evil precisely in a kind of ontological madness, in the "derangement" of man's position among beings (his self-centeredness), as a necessary intermediate step ("vanishing mediator") in the passage from "prehuman nature" to our symbolic universe: "man, in his very essence, is a *Katastrophe*—a reversal that turns him away from the genuine essence. Man is the only catastrophe in the midst of beings." (Heidegger 1984, 94)

However, at this crucial point where in some sense everything is decided, I think that we should make a step further with regard to Heidegger's formulation—"a derangement of his position among beings"—a step indicated by some other formulations of Heidegger himself. It may

appear clear what Heidegger aims at by the quoted formulation: man as *Da-Sein* (the "being-there" of Being, the place of the disclosure of Being) is an entity irreducibly rooted in his body (I use here the masculine form since it is at work in Heidegger). However, if the disclosure of the entire domain of entities is rooted in a singular entity, then something "deranged" is taking place: a particular entity is the exclusive site at which all entities appear, acquire their Being; so, to put it brutally, you kill a man and you simultaneously 'kill Being'. The ultimate cause of the derangement that pertains to *Da-Sein* thus resides in the fact that *Dasein* is by definition embodied, and, towards the end of his life, Heidegger conceded that, for philosophy, "the body phenomenon is the most difficult problem" and that "[t]he bodily /*das Leibliche*/ in the human is not something animalistic. The manner of understanding that accompanies it is something that metaphysics up till now has not touched on." (Heidegger 1979, 146). I am tempted to risk the hypothesis that it is precisely the psychoanalytic theory which was the first to touch on this key question: is not the Freudian eroticized body, sustained by libido, organized around erogenous zones, precisely the non-animalistic, non-biological body? Is not this (and not the animalistic) body the proper object of psychoanalysis? Heidegger totally misses this dimension when in his *Zollikoner Seminare*, he dismisses Freud as a causal determinist:

> He postulates for the conscious human phenomena that they can be explained without gaps, i.e. the continuity of causal connections. Since there are no such connections 'in the consciousness,' he has to invent 'the unconscious,' in which there have to be the causal links without gaps. (Heidegger 2017, 260)

This interpretation may appear correct: is it not that Freud tries to discover a causal order in what appears to our consciousness as a confused and contingent array of mental facts (slips of tongue, dreams, clinical symptoms) and, in this way, to close the chain of causal links that run our psyche? However, Heidegger completely misses the way the Freudian 'unconscious' is grounded in the traumatic encounter of an Otherness whose intrusion precisely *breaks*, interrupts, the continuity of the causal link: what we get in the 'unconscious' is not a complete, uninterrupted, causal link, but the repercussions, the after-shocks, of traumatic interruptions. What Freud calls 'symptoms' are ways to deal with a traumatic cut, while 'fantasy' is a formation destined to cover up this cut. That's why, for Heidegger, a finite human being a priori cannot reach the inner peace and calm of Buddhist Enlightenment (nirvana). A world is disclosed to us

against the background of an ontological catastrophe: "man is the only catastrophe in the midst of beings."

Now we face the key question: is man as the only catastrophe in the midst of beings as exception, so that if we assume the impossible point-of-view of looking at the universe from a safe distance, we see a universal texture of beings just not deranged by catastrophes (since man is a catastrophe only from his own standpoint, as the exception that grounds his access to beings)? In this case, we are back at the Kantian position: reality 'in itself' outside the clearing within which it appears to us, is unknowable, we can only speculate about it the way Heidegger himself does when he plays with the idea that there is a kind of ontological pain in nature itself. Or should we, rather, take Heidegger's speculation seriously, so that the catastrophe is not only man but already nature in itself, and in man as the being-of-speech this catastrophe that grounds reality in itself only comes to word? Quantum physics, for example, also offers its own version of a catastrophe that grounds reality: the broken symmetry, the disturbance of the void quantum oscillations; theosophical speculations offer another version: the self-division or Fall of Godhead itself which gives birth to our world.

If we endorse this option, then we have to draw the only consequent conclusion: every image or construction of 'objective reality', of the way it is in itself, 'independently of us', is one of the ways being is disclosed to us, and is as such already in some basic sense 'anthropocentric', grounded in (and at the same time obfuscating) the catastrophe that constitutes us. The main candidate for getting close to how reality is 'in itself' are formulas of relativity theory and quantum physics—the result of complex experimental and intellectual work to which nothing corresponds in our direct experience of reality. The only 'contact' we have with the Real "independent of us" is our very separation from it, the radical derangement; what Heidegger calls catastrophe. The paradox is that what unites as with the Real "in itself" is the very gap that we experience as our separation from it.

The same goes for Christianity where the only way to experience unity with god is to identify with Christ suffering on the cross, for example, with the point at which god is divided from himself. The basic premise of what I call 'materialist theology' or 'Christian atheism' is that the fall of man from god is simultaneously the fall of god from itself, and that there is nothing that precedes this fall: 'god' is the retroactive effect of its own fall. And this move of experiencing the gap itself as the point of unity is the basic feature of Hegel's dialectic, which is why the space beyond Heidegger's thought that we designated as the space beyond the transcendental is

the space to which Hegelian thought belongs. This is also the space for thinking which cannot be reduced to science. Heidegger offers us his own ambiguous formulation of this obscure point: "I often ask myself—this has for a long time been a fundamental question for me – what nature would be without man—must it not resonate through him in order to attain its own most potency" (Heidegger 1990, 44).

Note that this passage is from the time immediately after Heidegger's lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* from 1929–30, where also formulated was a Schellingian hypothesis that, perhaps, animals are, in a hitherto unknown way, aware of their lack, of the 'poorness' of their relating to the world; perhaps there is an infinite pain pervading the entire living nature:

> if deprivation in certain forms is a kind of suffering, and poverty and deprivation of world belongs to the animal's being, then a kind of pain and suffering would have to permeate the whole animal realm and the realm of life in general. (Heidegger 1995, 271)

When Heidegger speculates about pain in nature itself taken independently of man, we should read this claim without committing ourselves to anthropocentric-teleological thinking. Along these lines, one can also understand why Kant claims that, in some sense, world was created so that we can fight our moral struggles in it: when we are caught into an intense struggle which means everything to us, we experience it as if the whole world will collapse if we fail; the same holds also when we fear the failure of an intense love affair. There is no direct teleology here; our love encounter is the result of a contingent encounter, so it could easily also not have happened but once it does happen it decides how we experience the whole of reality. When Benjamin wrote that a big revolutionary battle decides not only the fate of the present but also of all past failed struggles, he mobilizes the same retroactive mechanism that reaches its climax in religious claims that, in a crucial battle, not only the fate of us but the fate of god himself is decided.

This brings us to the question of time. Apocalypse is characterized by a specific mode of time, clearly opposed to the two other predominant modes: traditional circular time (the time ordered and regulated on cosmic principles, reflecting the order of nature and the heavens; the time-form in which microcosm and macrocosm resonate in each other in harmony) and the modern linear time of gradual progress or development: the apocalyptic time is the 'time of the end of time', the time of emergency, of the 'state of exception' whereby the end is near and we are preparing for

it. In such a constellation, the standard probability-logic no longer applies; we need a different logic of temporality described by Jean-Pierre Dupuy:

> The catastrophic event is inscribed into the future as a destiny, for sure, but also as a contingent accident: it could not have taken place, even if, in *futur anterieur,* it appears as necessary. […] [I]f an outstanding event takes place, a catastrophe, for example, it could not not have taken place; nonetheless, insofar as it did not take place, it is not inevitable. It is thus the event's actualization—the fact that it takes place—which retroactively creates its necessity. (DuPuy 2005, 19)

Dupuy provides the example of the French presidential elections in May 1995 and quotes the January forecast of the main polling institute: "If, on next May 8, Ms. Balladur will be elected, one can say that the presidential election was decided before it even took place." If—accidentally—an event takes place, it creates the preceding chain which makes it appear inevitable. In this sense, although we are determined by destiny, we are nonetheless *free to choose our destiny*. This, according to Dupuy, is also how we should approach the ecological crisis: not to 'realistically' appraise the possibilities of the catastrophe, but to accept it as Destiny in the precise Hegelian sense: like the election of Balladur, if the catastrophe will happen, one can say that its occurrence was decided before it even took place. Destiny and free action (to block the 'if') thus go hand in hand: freedom is at its most radical the freedom to change one's Destiny.

This, then, is how Dupuy proposes to confront the catastrophe: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourself into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ("If we were to do that and that, the catastrophe we are in now would not have occurred!") upon which we then act today. Therein resides Dupuy's paradoxical formula: we have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, the catastrophe will take place; it is our destiny and, then, on the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past. Instead of saying "the future is still open, we still have the time to act and prevent the worst", one should accept the catastrophe as inevitable, and then act to retroactively undo what is already "written in the stars" as our destiny.

The rather sad conclusion we are forced to draw from all this is that a catastrophe is not something awaiting as in the future, something that can be avoided with well-thought-out strategy. Catastrophe in (not only)

its most basic ontological sense is something that always-already happened, and we, the surviving humans, are what remains; at all levels, even in the most empirical sense. Do the immense reserves of oil and coal, till now our most important source of energy, not bear witness of immense catastrophes that took place on our earth before the rise of humankind? Is the founding of Israel not a consequence of the Holocaust? Our normality is by definition post-apocalyptic.

As Alenka Zupančič perspicuously noted, the ultimate proof that the ecological apocalypse has already happened is that it has already been renormalized. Increasingly, we are 'rationally' reflecting on how to accommodate ourselves to it and even to profit from it (we often read that large parts of Siberia will be open to agriculture; that they can already grow vegetables on Greenland; that the melting of ice on the northern pole will make transport of goods from China to the United States much shorter). An exemplary case of normalization is the predominant reaction to the disclosures of whistleblowers like Assange, Manning, and Snowden, which is not so much a kind of denial ("WikiLeaks is spreading lies!") but rather something like: "We all know our governments are doing these things all the time, there is no surprise here!" The shock at the revelations is thus neutralized by reference to the wisdom of those who are strong enough to sustain a sober look at the realities of life. Against such 'realism' we should allow ourselves to be fully and naïvely struck by the obscenity and horror of the crimes disclosed by WikiLeaks. Sometimes, naivety is the greatest virtue.

The main voices of renormalization are so-called 'rational optimists' like Matt Ridley who bombard us with good news: who declare that the 2010s were the best decade in human history, poverty is declining in Asia and Africa, pollution is decreasing, etc. If this is the case, then where does the growing atmosphere of apocalypse come from? Is it not an outgrowth of a self-generated pathological need for unhappiness? When rational optimists tell us that we are overly scared about minor problems, our answer should be that, on the contrary, we are not scared enough. As Alenka Zupančič formulates the paradox: "Apocalypse has already begun, but it seems that we still *prefer to die* than to allow the apocalyptic threat to scare us to death." In the Spring of 2020, the lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, said that grandparents like him don't want to sacrifice the country's economy during the coronavirus crisis: "No one reached out to me and said, 'as a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?'" Patrick said. "And if that's the exchange, I'm all in" (quoted in Rodriguez 2020). Even if it was meant

seriously, such a gesture of self-sacrifice is not an act of true courage but an act of cowardice and precisely because it fits exactly Zupančič's words: Patrick prefers to die rather than to courageously confront the threat of catastrophe.

It is easy to see how rational optimists and prophets of doom are two sides of the same coin: the first are telling us that we can relax, there is no cause for alarm, things are not so bad at all; the others are telling us that everything is already lost and we can just relax and perversely enjoy the spectacle. They both prevent us from thinking and acting, from deciding, and from making a choice. If we access the data soberly, there is one simple conclusion to be drawn from them: the ecological crises which are exploding lately open up a quite realist prospect of the collective suicide of humanity itself. Is there a last exit from the road to our perdition or is it already too late, so that all we can do is find a way to painless suicide? What should we do in such a predicament? The temptation to be avoided here is the temptation of modesty. We should, above all, avoid the common wisdom according to which the lesson of the ecological crises is that we are part of nature, not its center, se we have to change our way of life; limit our individualism, develop new forms of solidarity, and accept our modest place in the life on our earth. Or, as Judith Butler put it, "an inhabitable world for humans depends on a flourishing earth that does not have humans at its center. We oppose environmental toxins not only so that we humans can live and breathe without fear of being poisoned, but also because the water and the air must have lives that are not centered on our own" (Butler 2021). 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. If we also have to care 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. To escape into the comfortable modesty of our finitude and mortality is not an option, it is a false exit to a catastrophe. So, again, what can and should we do in this unbearable situation, unbearable because we have to accept that we are one among the species on the earth, but we are at the same time burdened by the impossible task to act as universal managers of the

life on earth? Hannah Arendt outlines the only way out apropos parental authority:

> Modern man could find no clearer expression for his dissatisfaction with the world, for his disgust with things as they are, than by his refusal to assume, in respect to his children, responsibility for all this. It is as though parents daily said: 'In this world even we are not very securely at home; how to move about in it, what to know, what skills to master, are mysteries to us too. You must try to make out as best you can; in any case you are not entitled to call us to account. We are innocent, we wash our hands of you. (Arendt 1961, 191)

Although this imagined answer of the parents is factually more or less true, it is nonetheless existentially false: a parent cannot wash his/her hands in this way. The same goes for saying: "I have no free will, my decisions are the product of my brain signals, so I wash my hands, I have no responsibility for crimes that I committed!" Even if this is factually true, it is false as my subjective stance. This means that the ethical lesson is that the parents should pretend (to know what to do and how the world works), for there is no way out of the problem of authority other than to assume it, in its very fictionality, with all the difficulties and discontents this entails.

But, again, what does such instance imply? I want to propose here a link to Antigone. From the standpoint of *eumonia*, a good and lawful order of the city, Antigone is most definitely demonic/uncanny: her defying act expresses a stance of de-measured excessive insistence which disturbs the "beautiful order" of the city; her unconditional ethics violates the harmony of the *polis* and is, as such, "beyond human boundary." The irony is that, while Antigone presents herself as the guardian of the immemorial laws which sustain human order, she acts as a freakish and ruthless abomination; there definitely is something cold and monstrous about her, as is rendered by the contrast between her and her warmly-human sister Ismene. If we want to grasp the stance that leads Antigone to perform the funeral of Polineikos, we should move forwards from the over-quoted lines about the unwritten laws to a later speech of her where she specifies what she means by the law that she cannot not obey. The standard translation goes as follows:

> I'd never have done it
> for children of my own, not as their mother,
> nor for a dead husband lying in decay—
> no, not in defiance of the citizens.

> What law do I appeal to, claiming this?
> If my husband died, there'd be another one,
> and if I were to lose a child of mine.
> I'd have another with some other man.
> But since my father and my mother, too,
> are hidden away in Hades' house,
> I'll never have another living brother.
> That was the law I used to honor you.

These lines caused a scandal for centuries, with many interpreters claiming that they must be a later interpolation. Even the translation of the first sentence varies. There are some which totally turn around its meaning, like the following one: "Whether a mother of children or a wife, I'd always take up this struggle and go against the city's laws." Then there are translations which delete the brutal mention of rotting corpses, with Antigone simply stating that she would never violate the public laws for a dead husband or child. Then there is the above-quoted translation which, like most of them, does mention corpses in decay, but merely as a fact, not as something Antigone subjectively assumes. One of the rare correct translations of these lines which fully renders Antigone's subjective stance is David Feldshuh's: "For Creon's law, I would bow to it if / A husband or a son had died. I'd let their bodies / Rot in the steaming dust unburied and alone." (Sophocles 2004). "I'd let their bodies rot," as Alenka Zupančič noted in her extraordinary new study on *Antigone*, is not just the statement of the fact that an unburied corpse is rotting in the open but the expression of her active stance towards it: she *would* let the body rot.[1] (Zupančič 2022).

It is clear from this passage that Antigone is at the very opposite end of just applying to her dead brother the general unwritten primordial rule of the respect for the dead. Therein resides the predominant reading of *Antigone*: she enacts a universal rule deeper than all social and political regulations. Although this rule is supposed to allow for no exception, its partisans usually oscillate when one confronts them with a case of extreme evil: should Hitler also be given a proper funeral? Cornel West likes to call persons he writes about "brothers"—say, in his course on Chekhov, he always referred to him as 'brother Anton'—but when I heard him saying this, I was tempted to ask him if he would also, when talking about Hitler, refer to him as 'brother Adolph'. Judith Butler tries to save the day here by deftly pointing out that the reference to a brother who cannot be replaced is ambiguous: Oedipus himself is her father but also her brother (they share the same mother); but I don't think we can extrapolate this opening into a new universality of the respect for all those who

1 I rely here heavily on Alenka Zupančič. 2022. *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax*. New York: Fordham University Press. This booklet is simply a game changer: nothing will remain the same after it; everybody dealing with Antigone should read it.

are marginal; excluded from the public order of community. Another way to save the day is to claim that any person who dies is for some other(s) in the position of exception as defined by Antigone: even for Hitler, there must have been somebody for whom he was irreplaceable (let's not forget that, for the citizens of Thebes, Polineikos *was* a criminal). In this way, we can claim that Antigone's 'exception' ("only for my brother am I ready to break the public law") is really universal: when we are facing death, the dead is always in a position of exception.

However, such a reading fails to avoid the paradox: Antigone must have been aware that, for hundreds (at least) who died in the battle for Thebes, the same holds as for Polineikos. Additionally, her reasoning is very strange: if her husband or her child were to die, she would let them rot only because she would be able to replace them. Why should respect for the dead be unconditional only for those who cannot be replaced? Doesn't the procedure of replacement she evokes (she can find another husband; breed another child) strangely ignore the uniqueness of each person? Why should another husband be able to replace a husband whom she would love in his singularity? Antigone's exception is grounded in her unique family situation: her privileging of her brother only makes sense against the background of all the misadventures that befell Oedipus's family. Far from being a simple ethical act expressing the utter devotion to one's family, her act is penetrated by obscure libidinal investments and passions. It is only in this way that we can explain the weird mechanical reasoning that justifies her exception (brother cannot be replaced): her reasoning is the superficial mask of a deeper passion.

So, the fact remains that what Antigone does is something quite unique: her universal rule is "let the bodies rot," and she fully honors this rule with only the exception of her particular case. The law that she obeys in properly burying Polineikos is the law of exception, and this is a very brutal law, far from any human reconciliation. This brings us back to the distinction between examples and exemplum: Antigone's monstrous act is not an example of anything, it clearly violates the universal law, but it is nonetheless its exemplum, the exemplum which not only functions as an exception with regard to this law but which *turns this exception itself into a law of its own*. Antigone, thus, makes a Hegelian step further with regard to the triad of law, its examples, and its exemplum: she transposes the gap that separates exemplum from examples back into the universal domain of the law itself. She demonstrates how the consequent actualization of the universal law has to turn it into its opposite. Instead of opposing the pure law (respect for the dead) to its factual violations (we often let them

rot), she elevates these violations themselves into a universal law (let them all rot) and elevates the law of respecting the dead into an exception.

Among the big translations of *Antigone*, Friedrich Hoelderlin's is deservedly praised as unique, and one cannot but note how her exception (her readiness to perform the proper funeral of her brother) can be read in the light of a specific feature of Hoelderlin's late poetry: instead of first describing a state of things and then mentioning the exception ('but'"), he often begins a sentence directly by '*aber*' ('but') in German, without indicating which is the 'normal' state disturbed by the exception, as in the famous lines from his hymn *Andenken*: "Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter" / "But poets establish what remains." The standard reading, of course, is that, after the events, poets are able to perceive the situation from the mature standpoint, i.e. from the safe distance when the historical meaning of the events become clear. What if, however, there is nothing before the 'but', just a nameless chaos, and a world (concocted by a poet) emerges as a 'but' as an act of disturbing a chaotic void? What if at the beginning there is a 'but'? So, what if we read Hoelderlin's line literally? "But poets establish what remains", meaning poets donate/create/establish (*stiften*) a 'strophe', the opening line of a poem, which is that which remains after what? After the *Katastrophe* of the pre-ontological gap/rupture.

In this sense, Antigone's choice (of brother) is a primordial ethical act: it does not disturb a preceding universal ethical law, it just interrupts the pre-ethical chaos of "letting them rot". The pre-ethical chaos is cut short by "*aber mein Bruder*…" ("but my brother…"). However, is it not that Antigone's act is so problematic because it *does* disturb a pre-existing order of customs? There is only one conclusion to be drawn here: with her act, with her 'but' Antigone herself devalues the preceding order of customs, reducing it to a chaos or rotting corpses. An act does not just introduce order into chaos, it simultaneously annihilates a preceding order, denouncing it as a false mask of chaos. Today, we need such acts more than ever.

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