

STOCKTAKING IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC: Atypical Philosophical, Theological, and Other Observations

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Abstract: This article first discusses a possible meta-framework within which ethical, philosophical, theological, socio-cultural, and other perspectives on COVID-19 can be formulated and evaluated, making a heuristic distinction between the event (here, the pandemic) as a non-negotiable 'core' and the event as a 'text' open to interpretation, each with its own ethical implications. One's response to the event is a function of the interpretive framework adopted. The article goes on to argue that human subjects interpret events against a long-temporal hermeneutic horizon. After distinguishing between a religious and a secular understanding of the phenomenon (from an ethical perspective, a 'perplexing randomness' seems to set apart what is unfolding now from occurrences in the Biblical world), it makes a case for an ecological ethic in the context of religious naturalism. The current situation appears to mark an interregnum – or, hopefully, a new beginning – in a naturalistic *Lebenswelt* marked by impunity and farcical functioning. The article concludes with an exploration of ethical choice amid extreme experience.

Keywords: Ecological Ethic, End to Impunity, Event Ontology, Extreme Experience, Farcical Functioning, Hermeneutic Horizon, Interpretation, Randomness.

1. Introduction: Meta-Preliminaries for an Ethical Perspective

Concisely articulating the second of the "four affirmations" of his book *Being and Event*, Alain Badiou, proposes, in a prefatory statement of paradigmatic significance, that "[t]he structure of

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situations does not, in itself, deliver any truths. ... A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths 'the event'" (xii). As regards the first affirmation, Badiou says: "Cultural relativism cannot go beyond the trivial statement that different situations exist. It does not tell us anything about what, among the differences, legitimately matters to subjects" (xii). A full-fledged "event ontology" is, as it were, yet to be made known to the world. Whatever we have by way of an event ontology tells us: "This ontology is centered around the notion of *event*, seen here as the way by which cognitive agents classify arbitrary time/space regions" (Raimond and Abdallah). This is essentially the view expressed by Allen and Ferguson: "... events are primarily linguistic or cognitive in nature. That is, the world does not really contain events. Rather, events are the way by which agents classify certain useful and relevant patterns of change" (535).

It is difficult to take a call on the question of whether intangible 'entities' such as events are *in* the world, that is, in contradistinction to tangible ones such as objects. Would one find the core of an event if one were to peel off the structural layers that envelop it? That an event might have a non-negotiable core that transcends, or, in Badiou's idiom, ruptures with, enveloping discourses, representations, and narratives forms one pole of the spectrum of views in this regard, the other being represented by the prospect of interpretation discursively constituting the event. In ordinary situations, "critical emphasis on narratives, representations, and discourses ... enables us to contest underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions [surrounding an event]" (George, *Philosophical Meta-Reflections* 24). During extreme events, such as a fatal pandemic, certain pertinent questions arise:

Does this emphasis, in any way, do injustice to the original experience, the referent? Is there anything about the event itself which militates against prevalent representational, narrative, and discursive paradigms – which are [in many other cases] evaluated more for their rhetorical efficacy than for their correspondence to the original experience? When it

comes to extreme experiences, bartering 'essences' for heuristic, workable, flexible, and contestable constructs is an inadequate compensation for the tantalizing inability to develop a full-fledged ontology of the event or experience in question. In other words, narrative is inevitable but inadequate (George, *Philosophical Meta-Reflections*, 24).

An 'event realism,' of the above-suggested kind, might seem an indispensable prerequisite for an ethical response to human suffering. Upon this view, 'fidelity' to the overwhelming intensity, precise nature, and the true extent of the suffering must by default surpass cognitive agents' attempts at making meaning out of the extreme experience. Perhaps, that is why all, or most, academic reflections on human suffering are regarded – at least in some quarters – as possessing only a secondary value, smacks of some degree of indulgence, and are even feared – if one is sensitive enough – to do violence to the experience of others. Well, that is one variety of ethicality.

Human subjects are, however, meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures.¹ The responses that we formulate, ethical or unethical, sympathetic, empathetic, or apathetic, and the criteria by which they are evaluated are part and parcel of this meaning-making enterprise. To push this argument further, the event, including an extreme one such as a pandemic, is, uncanny though

¹Viktor Frankl based his psychotherapeutic method *Logotherapy* on the human *will to meaning*, even in the most harrowing circumstances. Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, was a Holocaust survivor who overcame the experience of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Kaufering, and Türkheim. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he argued, based on his own experience as an inmate, which he objectively analyzed as a psychiatrist, that a "striving to find meaning in one's life" enables people to overcome painful, dehumanizing, and even absurd conditions. Friedrich Nietzsche had argued that the "will to power" was the fundamental human impulse; for early Freud, it was pleasure. According to Frankl, the fundamental impulse is the search for meaning. Even if one were to die, the 'meaning-ful' thought that one could save someone else or be an inspiring memory for survivors could sustain an individual.

it might sound, a *text*. The principle at work here is what Jacques Derrida calls *iterability*: the capacity of signs and texts to be repeated in new situations and to produce new meanings. Each time we interpret, we put *iterability* to work. It is not difficult to see the hermeneutic diversity implied by Derrida's portmanteau term illustrated, albeit in a grotesque fashion, in the excruciating times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Typical of this diversity is the difference between the perspectives of those who are in the thick of things (e.g., isolated patients, health workers; a moment of carelessness while removing the personal protective equipment might cost one's life) and those who from the lockdown leisure of as-of-now safe homes, caught luckily on the safe side of history, count casualties elsewhere with a bit of *Schadenfreude*. A medical professional who goes out of the way to save lives of those men, women, and children whom she/he does not know at all, and another one who goes on leave thinking that she/he must save herself/himself for the future of her/his little ones have two different frames of reference. Respect for fragile, vulnerable fellow humans engaging in such a tedious, harrowing, and exhausting exercise – even of the vile sort – itself is an ethical imperative. Again, you find, on the one hand, volunteers putting themselves at risk, distributing essential items to people who have not received their wages/salaries, and on the other, a mob preventing the burial of a doctor in an act of fear-induced vigilantism. Personal and collective pathologies that have been dormant for long are awakened – as neighbourhood jealousies, personal rivalries, and exacerbated suspicion between communities – when we are pushed to the wall. And, as Samuel Coleridge put it almost two centuries ago, "Fear at my heart, as at a cup,/ My life-blood seemed to sip!" (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part III, lines 204-205). The economy-vs.-lives debate (more on this later) extends the catalogue of interpretive diversity. The one-size-for-all solutions that are touted are a failure of interpretation. For the poor and the marginalized, as opposed to those who are still being paid, the choice is between dying of disease and dying of hunger. It is a commonplace of these times that the pandemic has brought deep-rooted socio-economic disparities to the forefront

and widened old fault lines. A morally justifiable response, though not entirely reducible to interpretation but is the result of sound ethical reasoning and ultimately a matter of personal or collective choice, is primarily a function of interpretation.

In any case, the tension between the two aforementioned positions, that is, the event as a non-negotiable core and the event as a matter of interpretation, is an indispensable part of the meta-framework within which ethical, philosophical, theological, socio-cultural, political, and even economic perspectives on COVID-19 can be formulated and evaluated. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is widely considered the diceiest, at least till date, occurrence or event of our lifetime (the nearest temporal precedent is a century old – the Spanish Flu of 1918, which infected 500 million and killed anywhere between 17 million and 50 million people). Due to its very diceyness or precariousness, and given the still-evolving character of its understanding, the meaning(s) of the event remains incomplete, yet to be 'concretized' – it is still in the process of unfolding, and the meaning-making exercise will be consummated, if at all, only in retrospect.

2. Thinking and Acting against a Long-Temporal Hermeneutic Horizon

'Act ethically' is an imperative, a requirement. This will remain unfulfilled unless human subjects are empowered to do so, unless they have a larger matrix within which cognitions towards ethical action can evolve. An important component of this matrix is a framework for interpretation and understanding. Small wonder, then, that we endeavour to make sense of what is happening now against a long-temporal hermeneutic horizon, reading up on past epidemics and pandemics, and drawing upon resources of philosophy, literature, and history. Classics of philosophy and literature are recommended nowadays for reflection in self-isolation. In my previous work, I have argued that literature furnishes us with "templates of significance":

Literary representations console and convince us that [our] predicaments, agonies, and dilemmas are not banal. Non-

events become literary events. A trivial conversation becomes an existentially profound conversation, or, at least, a repartee. Self-revulsion is appropriately sublimated into moral dilemma. Fleeting moments of banality are given 'a local habitation and a name.' The self through which many mundane events crisscross, gains a quasi-heroic status. (George, *Philosophical Meta-Reflections*, 44)

This is especially true of our times. Among literary works, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Albert Camus's *The Plague* (*La Peste*; 1947) are season's favourites. So are pandemic movies, including *Outbreak* (1995) and *Contagion* (2011). We are reminded that "[t]he townspeople of Oran [in *The Plague*] did not have the recourse that today's global citizens have, in whatever town: to seek community in virtual reality" (Schillinger). Being, among other things, also an allegory of the Nazi attempt to take over the world, *The Plague* tells us that in our fight against the virus, we are up against a formidable enemy. In real life, countless health workers have heroically put themselves in the place of Dr Bernard Rieux, the community doctor who risks his life trying to heal and help people. We yearn for a time in near future when we can learn about the virus "slinking back to the obscure lair from which it had stealthily emerged" (247). A student of mine who earlier wanted to research on therapeutic reading has now decided to work on quarantine fiction.

Culture, in the restricted sense of products of art and philosophy, becomes a repertoire of resources for life in these hard times. Culture caters to the imaginary of a precarious, impoverished existence. Literary, liturgical, and Biblical quotations, proverbs, movie dialogues, snatches of songs, and even advertisement jingles punctuate our thoughts and words. Apart from the traditional argument that art seeks to mitigate an unpleasant reality, images, ideas, and verbal fragments from texts are enlisted to impart significance to personal and collective events. A WhatsApp message that I received from a colleague, in a light-hearted reference to W. B. Yeats's "Easter 1916," written against the backdrop of the self-sacrificial Easter Sunday uprising in colonial Dublin, read: "Easter 2020 ... All changed, changed

utterly/ A terrible beauty is born." Churches are closed, masses are suspended.

From history, we learn about the scapegoating of the Jews during the Black Death, and rue that particular communities are blamed even today, often unwarrantedly, for spreading the virus – in brazen acts of othering.² Old fault lines have reopened and widened, old suspicions, reawakened. In this and similar contexts, a bit of *meta-cognition* – a vital part of enlarging the matrix, mentioned earlier – might help us turn the social situation around. We can and must think about our own thinking. We can and must ask ourselves: 'why do I hold this view?'; 'what are the assumptions that lie behind my actions?'

3. Perplexing Randomness: Religious vs. Secular Understanding

The contrast between a religious understanding and a secular understanding of the pandemic does illustrate the radical difference of interpretive frames. But this contrast is of a more fundamental kind than the ones we discussed above. As a subtype of religious understanding, let us first take the theistic view. Elsewhere, I have argued that a "causal unascertainability of the world process [which consists of cosmic, historical, and personal trajectories]" can tilt the world view either way – towards the religious or the secular:

You prayed for something [believers in hospital wards must also have prayed] and got it. There is no way to determine whether a supernatural agent caused the outcome or whether this happened in the natural course of events. Alternatively, you prayed for something, but did not get it. Again, there is no way to determine whether it was due to a fault of yours that you did not get it, or if this was the only way events could have unfolded. You committed an act which is considered to be offensive to God. You had to bear adverse consequences. Was this the world process running its course, the natural

²Ethical issues involved in the encounter with the other is an issue whose discussion I have skipped due to paucity of space. See George, "Further Explorations in the Philosophy of the Other in Relation to Extreme Experience."

outcome of the act? Or, was it a punishment meted out by a supernatural agent? Alternatively, you committed an act which is considered to be offensive to God, and no adverse consequences followed. It is logically not possible to say on the basis of these consequences that God does or does not exist. God is then a name for the metaphysical uncertainty of "what might have been," which in most cases is unascertainable (George, *Ontology of Gods*, 43-44).

In the Judaeo-Christian scheme of things (at least in its purist form), we may say at the risk of generalization, all that happens – in this world and the next – is part of a divinely ordained programme apportioning reward and punishment for one's actions (*karma* and its consequences in the Hindu philosophy of life), as demonstrated by the Plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12).

The Plagues or the deity who sent them, at least in the case of the final one (the first nine probably affected everyone, but in a way ultimately beneficial to the Israelites), knew how to distinguish between the Israelites in bondage and the Egyptian master race. Before the final plague – death of the firstborn (Exodus 11: 1-12: 36) – God commands Moses to tell the Israelites to mark the "two side posts" and "the upper door posts" of their houses with a lamb's blood in order that the angel of death should "pass over" them (11: 7-13). Yahweh is benevolently partisan and makes a distinction between the persecuting group and the persecuted in order to execute His planned emancipation. The whole plan has a pattern to it. But this is not the way it is in the real world – outside the world of the Bible. There is no pattern; what one finds instead is a *perplexing randomness*. It is said that during the bubonic plague (the Black Death) that swept across Eurasia and North Africa in the late middle ages and killed a third of Europe's population, even priests and monks (doing God's work) who attended to patients succumbed to death and that common people silently drawing their lessons out of this development was one, albeit a minor one, factor that accelerated the gradual process of secularization. The good and the evil ones, the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish (both in a theological sense) all die! (The suffering of the innocents or of the

righteous has been a major theological conundrum throughout history, but this is not the appropriate place to go into its details.) And sometimes the wicked survive! There is no pattern to anything. This is one aspect of the condition of *the absurd* – the world is shorn of its metaphysical moorings, devoid of any underlying schema. The world has no innate meanings; the onus is on *us* to create them, which is a challenge and an opportunity.

On the contrary, if one inhabits a naturalistic *Lebenswelt*, that is, if one subscribes to a view of the universe that is closed to any influence external to it, such as that of supernatural agents, the simple scientific explanation suffices: the current pandemic is caused by the virus called SARS-CoV-2; it spreads through droplets produced via coughing, sneezing, and talking; its symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath; a vaccine is yet to be invented but Hydroxychloroquine, used previously to treat or prevent malaria, could be effective in some cases; and so on. But hang on! The believer is free to do some nitpicking, albeit from an impish perspective, and this in turn might raise a few questions. A hypothetical catalogue of surmises/questions and counter-surmises/counter-questions might go like this. The so-called good people who are suffering or dying might also have had skeletons in their cupboard. Who said there is no randomness in the Biblical world?: "And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle" (Exodus 12: 29). People who were personally not culpable for the enslavement of the Israelites and the resultant imbroglio also died. Can one infer that an entire nation will pay for the sins of the ruling elite? As for visiting the sins of the fathers on the children, the Old Testament is quite clear with its countless passages (Exodus 20: 5; Exodus 34: 7; Deuteronomy 5: 9; Job 21: 19; Isaiah 14: 20-21; Isaiah 65: 7; Jeremiah 32: 18; Lamentations 5: 7) on the topic: "The Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Numbers 14: 18). We often

hear this from the elders, accompanied by histories of ruined families. But the Bible reverses the dictum in Deuteronomy 24: 16; 2 Kings 14: 6; and Ezekiel 18: 17, 19-20. John 9: 2 does clarify that human suffering (blindness, here) may indeed be part of a divine messianic scheme, but not necessarily punishment for sins.

In the face of a calamity such as the present one, it is not uncommon to see Friedrich Nietzsche's statement "*Gott ist tot*" resurface. But it has become a cliché. Nietzsche's enigmatic aphorism was not a reaction to divine non-intervention in human suffering. After all, Nietzsche added the rider that it was we who had killed God, meaning modern conditions had made God redundant. In Irvin D. Yalom's *When Nietzsche Wept*, a fictional account of the philosopher's life, Lou Andreas-Salomé asks Nietzsche why he said, "God is dead," and not that "God never existed." Perceived divine absence amidst the suffering of His devotees has, however, confounded believers. In another instance, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Jewish theology revived the concept of *Hester Panim* (literally, "hiding face"), which means concealed providence. The idea is that God usually runs the world and takes care of His devotees but there are times when He allows natural (or historical) processes to run their course.

4. Religious Naturalism and an Ecological Ethic

In any case, theism and atheistic naturalism are not the only options on the table. Among the in-between options, one finds religious naturalism, concerned with the question of whether there can be a post-supernatural (or non-supernatural) religion in the wake of scientific world-explanations. Some such religious naturalisms are responses that are specific to theistic, particularly monotheistic, conceptions of God. One finds a variety of religious naturalisms across cultures: pantheism, panentheism, panpsychism, materialism, monism, holism, process theology, emergentism, religious humanism, idealism, integrationism, contextualism, biotheology, naturalistic mysticism, religiopoetics, and operational theism.

According to Jerome A. Stone, religious naturalism "asserts that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm

(such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world, but that yet religious significance can be found within this world" (1). To Stone, "religious naturalists tend to fall into three groups: (1) those who conceive of God as the creative process within the universe, (2) those who think of God as the totality of the universe considered religiously, and (3) those who do not speak of God yet still can be called religious" (130). We need not go into this categorization, but what is of import to us is that to most religious naturalists, the universe, considered as a web of life, a unity in itself, even if closed to external influences, has a sacred character and significance. In such a conception of the universe, one may find the foundational principles of an *ecological ethic*. Analogous to traditional religion, sacrilege here means violating the sacred unity of the web of life – or, in more specific terms, violence to the non-human part of nature. Pictures of the 'wet market' in Wuhan, China are a reminder of such human violations. Microorganisms that were harmless in animals' bodies have gained a fatal potency in the human bodies to which they were transmitted. When human avarice destroyed animal habitats and/or brought remote species into contact with humans, these microorganisms found new abodes. Has nature, already red in tooth and claw, turned vengeful towards humanity for all that has been done to it? Is what we are witnessing now the tragic climax of what Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer call "instrumental reason" (228), a critical concept that could be helpful for a re-engagement with the earth and its non-human components. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, rationality generates an imperialistic desire to dominate everything and everyone. There is nothing that is not subject to the court of judgement of egoistic instrumentality. With regard to nature, its motto is 'learn, use, and dominate.' Enlightenment reason gave the final legitimacy and ultimate scientific tools for complete domination over nature: "To dominate nature boundlessly, to turn the cosmos into an endless hunting ground, has been the dream of millennia. ... It was the purpose of reason, on which man prided himself" (206).

As is known to many of us, Joanna Macy has articulated an alternative to the above-discussed scenario – by inclusively reconceiving the human self itself.³ In her essay “Awakening to the Ecological Self,” Macy calls for “shak[ing] off” our “mistaken identity”:

We have [pathologically] imagined that we are separate and competitive beings, limited to the grasp of our conscious egos, hence essentially fragile, endlessly needy. This delusion has brought us some high adventures, but also much suffering, and it will destroy us and our world if we don't wake up in time. For our own sake and the sake of all beings, we are called to rediscover our true nature, coextensive with all life on this planet ... coming home to the full reach of our being, ... home to our ecological self (201).

To Macy, a new response to the environment flows from reformed self-conception, which envisages a community of the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate within oneself. She sees “[t]he larger ecological sense of self and self-interest” at work in all those instances “where people put their lives on the line for another species,” such as the Chipko movement in Northern India, where people “risk injury and death to protect the remaining woodlands, blocking the axes and chainsaws with their bodies,” and in “the Greenpeace sailors as they put their frail, bobbing rubber boats in the way of the giant factory ships, so that the whales can escape to the depths of the sea” (201). This open pan-cosmic sense of selfhood, as well as the “deep ecology” which it gives rise to, “combines the mystical and the pragmatic” (202). Had it been only pragmatic, it would have meant merely conserving the earth for future utility. On the one hand, deep ecology envisages a ‘spiritual’ transition from separatedness and alienation to an experiential interconnectedness. On the other, the spiritual identity-transition is also “a motivation to action” (202). The pragmatic source of action “lies less in concerns for personal survival than in

³For a full-fledged discussion of deep ecology and the ethics it advocates, especially in the context of historical humanisms, see George, “The Discourse on the Human in Philosophical Retrospect.”

apprehensions of collective suffering – of what looms for human life and other species and unborn generations to come" (204).

Behind instrumental rationality is "the delusion that the self ... is so aloof that we can – as individuals, corporations, nation-states or as a species – be immune to what we do to other beings" (Macy 203). Paradoxically, it may be the case of future that in order to ensure human survival, we must undo the dogma of the human. The transcendence of the "personal ego" is a pre-requisite for rising above what Deena Metzger calls "species ego" (quoted in Macy 203). Macy eclectically draws her cognitive resources from the systems theory; Einsteinian relativism of perception; ecofeminism, which endorses feminine, maternal qualities of nurture and nonpossession in preference to male acquisitiveness; and nascent non-dualistic forms of spirituality, to argue for a human self and consciousness that knows no boundary but is continuous with all matter, other life-forms, and the earth itself. She focuses in particular on the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* (no-self or no-soul), where "one's sense of identity is understood as an ephemeral product of perceptual transactions," and its theory of causality called *pratitya samutpada* (dependent co-arising), which "presents a phenomenal reality so dynamic and interrelated that categorical subject-object distinctions dissolve" (207). Quoting Gregory Bateson, Macy reiterates: "We have imagined that the 'unit of survival' ... is the separate individual or the separate species. In reality, as throughout the history of evolution, it is the individual *plus* environment, the species *plus* environment, for they are essentially symbiotic" (205). Again, borrowing from Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, she places deep ecology beyond the presumed bases of altruism and morality, in a hitherto unperceived convergence of interests: "The requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of nature is felt and perceived as protection of ourselves" (209). Deep ecology builds symbiotic alliances with the non-human and reveals human fulfillment as compatible with a non-exploitative relation to the earth. Collective well-being, not man alone, becomes the measure of all things.

5. Impunity in a Naturalistic World Process: An Interregnum or a New Beginning?

Regardless of the naturalistic dismissals discussed above, a contemporary theistic believer might draw an uncanny lesson. The pandemic arrived at a time when human control (or of the powers that be) over virtually everything had been complete. For example, in the United States, production had been picking up and unemployment rates were at a record low prior to the arrival of the virus; and no President had ever failed to get re-elected in the history of the country when the economic vitals were this strong. Elsewhere, countries had been conquered and regimes had been toppled without helpless populations having any say whatsoever in who should be ruling them or even whether they should be alive. Neo-liberal capitalist enterprise had exploited resources of the Third World, along with its cheap labour and ever-ready markets to the hilt. Terrorism, that too in the name of God, had been unleashed upon innocents. Political adversaries had been murdered, and their murders, presented to the world as suicides or accidents. Electorates had been polarized on sectarian/ethnic lines and elections, smartly won. Within totalized structures and foreclosed processes, everything seemed possible; everything seemed under human control. And suddenly, everything appears beyond human control. The human powers that be fumble for the right decision. To the theist believer, *God has re-taken charge* – albeit in what appears to the limited human intelligence as a negative re-enchantment of the world! The world has been de-secularized in an unprecedented way – without religion having any role in it! And this should ideally be *the end of impunity* (or at least an interregnum) and *end to farcical functioning*.

This is a time of rethinking, if not reckoning, for institutions (universities, colleges, the press, hospitals, churches, families, and so forth), societies, individuals, and even disciplines – especially the humanities, given the myriad aspects of human experience and human/machine- and hard science/humanities interface that have been foregrounded by the pandemic. We are forced into a rethinking not because if we indulge in farcical functioning we

will or will not be penalized or rewards, withheld from us. It is because: (i) the matrix within which such functioning flourished is no longer available, at least for the time being; and (ii) the leisure furnished by cessation of activity (to put it in a Heideggerian fashion, when 'ready-to-hand' things go kaput they unconceal their being) also presents an opportunity to 'retreat' into a reflective mode of being, from where we, and the institutions and groups of which we are part, can, if we will, emerge resurgent. As we limp back into normalcy, it would be fruitful to reflect: are the purposes for which the institutions came into being, fulfilled in a reasonable measure? Or, have they become travesties of what they were originally intended to be? In universities and colleges, teachers and students are struggling to make a transition to online teaching. A recent Facebook post by an educationist observed: 'To me, this is the end of teaching and the beginning of self-learning.' We must ensure that in this transition, those who are not as privileged as others are, are not left behind. For example, alternatives need to be explored for those students who do not have access to internet or where connectivity is poor. Physically challenged teachers and students must be provided teaching-learning materials in accessible formats. For medical staff, it is difficult to take a patient off the ventilator or another life-saving device and make scarce medical resources available to others who have better chances of survival.⁴

It is reported that domestic violence has increased several times over in several cities during the lockdown. Perhaps those who were employed and used to seeing each other only twice a day (in the morning and in the evening) are compelled to face and deal with each other all the while! This, nevertheless, is also a time to rebuild our relationships – between husband and wife, between parents and children, and among siblings. This is the time to care more for the elderly, who are clinically more vulnerable to COVID-19, ensuring that asymptomatic youngsters do not infect them. This is the time to recollect memories of childhood when

⁴See Jenny Arvie.

our parents and grandparents sacrificed their own needs and pleasures and provided for us. Dysfunctional families will have to become functional. It is time to begin living life consciously and conscientiously. Our times are indeed a challenge, but they also present an opportunity for resurgence.

6. Ethically Choosing amid Extreme Experience

On 28 March 2020, Celia Viggo Wexler, responding to a news item that was widely reported, wrote:

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick essentially said that the economic well-being of the country was more important than the lives of older people. The Republican politician was riffing on a theme that President Donald Trump has been hammering at this week, framing the dilemma posed by the coronavirus as either save the entire U.S. economy or tolerate a few more deaths. "We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself," Trump tweeted Sunday.

Or as Patrick put it: "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?'" He continued, "And if that's the exchange, I'm all in."

The implication of Patrick's comments was that older people are a burden on society and should be willing to risk being infected by COVID-19 to make sure that all other Americans are able to patronize bars, restaurants and stores.

Another news report claimed that a woman with children was deprived of the "stimulus checks" announced by the Government of the United States because she was married to an immigrant.

Even if we consider the die-of-hunger-vs.-die-of-disease dilemma, what lurks beneath the position represented by President Trump and Lt. Gov. Patrick is a kind of instrumental rationality. Remember the Kantian maxim that people are not a means, but an end in themselves. The people who might be left to die are the ones who helped build the very economy that the ruling class wants to salvage through a sacrifice but are 'useless' now. The dilemma that the economy/society at large is faced with

gets replicated in families: save the livelihood of the young or the lives of the old? Livelihood or life? Judging from the outside is of course easy.

The unarticulated, poignant bargain that Lt. Gov. Patrick is willing to strike assumes an ominous significance with the rider that Wexler adds: "The widespread condemnation Dan Patrick's statements received obscured the fact that he was merely speaking out loud a prejudice that's been lurking in the American psyche for quite a while, even among people who are older." No one had to make such difficult choices in ordinary times. But these are extraordinary times. As regards the question of such choice, perhaps there was no other time in our living memory when Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum "Existence precedes essence" held truer. You make your choices (hard ones, often between self and other, sometimes between life and death), decide your values, and in the process define *who you are*.

Let me conclude with two heartening statements that I read or heard in the above context. The first is a letter written by Ian Dunlop to the editor of *The Australian*, entitled "Morality Must Always Take Precedence over Economic Rationalism." The letter applauded the "assertive manifesto" ("Abandon the Elderly? Not on My Watch"; 4 May 2020) of Greg Sheridan, foreign affairs correspondent and commentator with *The Australian*, wherein he "deplores what he calls 'a crude and really deeply anti-human economism at work' in the debate on how best we may survive. ... giving priority to the economy over human life is repugnant." The second is a statement made by economist and Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerjee in a panel discussion chaired by Prannoy Roy on NDTV 24x7 (3 April 2020). Among other things, the panelists discussed the need to help the poorest, the starving poor, by distributing the huge amount of grains (60 million tonnes) stocked in government warehouses. Distribution raises its own logistical problems. Who should we distribute it to? How does one identify the 'real' beneficiary – the desperate? How do we make sure that 'undeserving' people do not get it? Should we ask for the ration

card?⁵ Or, the Aadhar (unique ID)? Putting an end to speculations on the nitty-gritty (“macro-prudential reasons”), Banerjee said: “We should be fast, not clever”!

7. Conclusion

An observation, in varying vocabulary, has often been made by many about the Holocaust (the *Shoah*), which, again, might signify differently for diverse groups and individuals: ‘Those were difficult times. And very few – nations, localities, individuals – emerged out of the hell morally untainted.’ A bit of reflection might ensure that this does not turn out to be true of our own hard times. And God forbid we should reach a stage when we incriminate ourselves remembering the words of Dante Alighieri paraphrased at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC: “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis maintain their neutrality.” Of course, making ethical choices and evaluating human actions are not easy tasks, especially in extreme situations, such as those engendered by the current pandemic. These tasks are a function of myriad human propensities (e.g., the need for interpretation), covering many walks of life, and are long-temporally entangled in several discourses and implicated in issues whose unending alignments and scope transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. Hence the need to rethink the terms of social discourse as well as its component of ethical ratiocination (often unprecedented) within which the nitty-gritty and constraints of situations, of which we had several real-life examples in this article, can be understood in a nuanced manner and reasonably just and compassionate responses be allowed to evolve. As we know, our understanding and the responses that flow from it have intricate and many not-so-obvious ramifications. I have here sketched the broad contours of the matrices of understanding within which such onerous tasks can be responsibly undertaken and conscientiously performed.

⁵Many migrant workers do not have access to the Public Distribution System in the places they work.

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