

University Press.

hooks, b. (2001). *All About Love: New Visions*. Harper Perennial.

Parfit, D. (1987). *Reasons and Persons*. Clarendon Press.

Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Belknap Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1996). Love and Justice. Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action, 23–40.

Pandemic, biopolitics and the ethical significance of responsibility

Nikos Nikoletos

University of Ioannina (Ioannina)

In the face of all sorts of crises, representational projections of a more or less *open* future are always raised. Undoubtedly, behind these projections one finds the spectrum of modernity that is the idea of infinite progress. The metaphysics of progressivism highlights that any crisis should be seen as a necessary steppingstone leading to a positive *bringing-forth* of ontic and social forms, which can absorb any discomforts created by the crisis itself.

As far as the Covid-19 pandemic is concerned, many thinkers attempted to examine the current situation in terms of *transcendence*. For example, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2020) referred to a communism imposed by socio-historical circumstances, implying a more or less cunning manifestation of Reason. In light of this argument, a virus can, according to Žižek, function as a kind of Gramscian passive revolutionary instance within the socio-historical apparatus. At the same time, public intellectuals and political scientists, like Bruno Latour (2020) underlined the way in which the pandemic is indeed a valuable weapon to be used in the fight to reduce greenhouse effect. Inspired by theorists of the so-called *reflexive modernity*, writers like Naomi Klein (2019) suggested the unique opportunity offered by the coronavirus pandemic for a revolutionary transformation of our socio-economic apparatus.

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a hermeneutical arena upon which theories about social change can be found. The purpose of this presentation, however, is not to examine the theoretical and political integrity of such theories. Our purpose is to explore the encounter between *self* and *other*, as it takes place in the context of social-distancing and the bio-political paradigm that it entails.

The ethics of face-to-face encounter and the challenge of social distancing

The pandemics, according to Homer, clearly involve a kind of civil war, a war that leads to dystopias. In this sense, the dominant discourse on responsibility as an individually-centered Kantian moral, where everyone treats the "necessary sanitary measures" as universal laws, seems the primary condition for the cohesion of society as a whole and the avoidance of a war of all against all.

Individual responsibility, however, risks being entrapped in a scheme of meaningless self-reference, if we dissociate it from the practice of social distancing, with which it forms an inseparable unity. We argue that the practice and concept of social-distancing is nothing more than a normative principle, a bio-political abstraction that organizes life on our historical threshold of postmodernity, in which all of us find ourselves discontent (Agamben 2020). Is this encounter of ethics (individual responsibility) and politics (bio-political power) capable of creating the conditions proper for the emergence and prevalence of a universal spirit of solidarity among people? Or, on the contrary, will it be the death knell of the hitherto known political society, raising new Great Walls between us?

Despite both the limits of this particular presentation and the suffocating narrative of the bio-political discourse, I will attempt to examine the question of responsibility by resorting to the philosophical itinerary of Emmanuel Levinas, according to which the origin of responsibility is the unprecedented encounter with the *other* as given. To question the content of responsibility in the present context of the bio-political state of exception, will make crystal clear the contradiction between human sociality and responsibility and a state of constant or even temporary denial of one's fellow neighbor.

To be precise, Levinas is a thinker for whom responsibility is the

constitutive element of the human subject, the one that defines our species-being, our very essence (Levinas, 1985; 1999; 2005). The human subject is actually subjected to the other, he is subordinate to another human being. According to the Levinasian philosophy, the encounter with the face of the other binds us to a pre-ontological responsibility towards him. The Levinasian ethics of responsibility offers a philosophically radical way of contemplating responsibility as a moral intersubjective relationship. Our responsibility towards the other is infinite, asymmetrical, that is without asking for receivables. The other person is not someone I choose. He is presented as an anonymous call, as someone who stands before me as an imposing presence. Towards this presence, the self is brought within life (*επιμμένο*ς in Heidegger's words) that is Being.

Reference list:

- Agamben, G. (2020). *L' invenzione di un'epidemia. Quodlibet*. Retrieved from: <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>
- Klein, N. (2019). *On Fire, The burning Case for a Green New Deal*. UK: Allen Lane.
- Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1999). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2005). *Humanism of the Other*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Latour, B. (2020). Imaginer les gestes-barrières contre le retour à la production d'avant-crise. *AOC media – Analyse Opinion Critique* (blog). Retrieved: March 29, 2020. <https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/03/29/imaginer-les-gestes-barrieres-contre-le-retour-a-laproduction-davant-crise/>
- Žižek, S. (2020). *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. Polity. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Pandemic%21%3A+COVID+19+S+hakes+the+World-p9781509546107>