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The COURAGE to EXIST

A Philosophy of Life and Death in the Age of Coronavirus

Ramin Jahanbegloo

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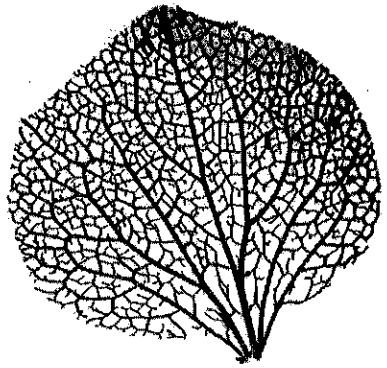

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THE COURAGE TO EXIST: A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE AND DEATH IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

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To Shefa Siegel

Et nous ne savons pas ce que c'est que la vie
Et nous ne savons pas ce que c'est que le jour
Et nous ne savons pas ce que c'est que l'amour

And we don't know what life is
And we don't know what days are
And we don't know what love is

—From 'Chanson', *Paroles*, Jacque Prévert, 1976

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LIVING

I

Days are very similar in one's life, but one should try to seize each day by thinking it differently. It is not *what* we do but *how* we do it that matters. We all live the same life but we each live it differently. That is what makes life interesting. Starting the day at dawn is an art that the birds have perfected. They sing to us innocently and without hesitation, not knowing that we humans have lost the art of living. If we human beings keep our faith in life, if we believe in living with equal faith, we will know how to continue to live like the rest of the natural world. It is by a mathematical point only that we are alive today, but mathematicians don't know how to listen to the birds singing. We may not be able to give meaning to our lives with calculus or trigonometry, but we can certainly maintain ourselves on this earth by living according to the dictates of wisdom. To be wise is not merely to follow the path of reason. Many people are capable of common sense, without being necessarily wise. To be wise is to see the cruelty of fate, but also to be able to surpass it. A wise human being is one who knows how to live simply and be independent-minded. How can a human being be wise and not think independently? An army of mobs who cannot think individually does not make one wise individual.

Wisdom is something which is hard to gain while sojourning among human beings. Unfortunately, the narrowness of our social experiences is of no help to our poor mortal soul in creating true spiritual integrity day by day. Henry David Thoreau is right to say that, 'The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly' (Thoreau 2000a: 6). Human beings are too egoistic and arrogant to learn from life. The mass of humans lead meaningless lives of mediocrity and die without having learnt anything of value from life. They cannot even be useful in the education of their children, as animals are to their young. Animals know how to teach the art of survival to their young because they have fully experienced and *lived* life. But here is life, at our disposal, and yet it remains a domain to a great extent unlived by us. Truly, what is life without the experience of life? Nothing but eating, sleeping and working like slaves. I fully agree with Schopenhauer when he says that:

> the two foes of human happiness are pain and boredom. We may go further, and say that in the degree in which we are fortunate enough to get away from the one, we approach the other. Life presents, in fact, a more or less violent oscillation between the two. The reason of this is that each of these two poles stands in a double antagonism to the other, external or objective, and inner or subjective. Needy surroundings and poverty produce pain; while, if a man is more than well off, he is bored. (Schopenhauer 1901: 18)

It is because we look for happiness that we suffer and we are bored.

Life is not a quest for happiness; it is the experience of suffering. Human beings suffer because they are in constant search of happiness. The incessant anxiety and fear of not

succeeding in life is a common human psychology. It has been there since humankind decided to live in what it called civilisation. Civilisation, especially the modern one, is built on the illusion that we must at all costs be successful, even if we completely miss out on the meaning of life. Success has become the iron necessity of our meaningless civilisation. We wait in a restless ecstasy of success, though we are not consoled much by it as we are unable to overcome the forces of pain and boredom. We humans constantly have a lot to do, but we invariably fail to grasp what is most essential. Nietzsche is right: 'The man who has lot to do usually keeps his general views and opinions almost unchanged' (Nietzsche 2008: 6). Generally, people who are resistant to change and self-satisfied in their own opinions are vain. A vain person is a prisoner in a mental ghetto. Feeling exemplary or unique in a mental ghetto is not just an illusion, it is also the summit of all vanities. Pascal says, 'Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is very vain himself' (Pascal 2008b: 16).

Let us consider for a moment the vanity that Pascal refers to. He takes us back to the Latin sense of the word, *vanitas*, which refers to the emptiness of a being whose pretensions go beyond their actual capacities. There are people who try to entertain themselves with their unfulfilled wishes, unaware of the emptiness that surrounds them. The wise person knows that the world is vain and meaningless, but s/he also knows that life should not be lived cheaply. To live profoundly is to taste the rare moments of life which anticipate all common sense. Most human beings appear never to have considered what life is, and are too preoccupied thinking about themselves to either notice or to be noticed by others. As Nietzsche affirms, 'because we have acknowledged a book of laws, we also think we now have to act like judges' (Nietzsche 2008: 23). Indeed, there is no place for a wise person, a free thinker, in the crowd. One cannot dwell in the noble country

of spirit without a show of prudence. The book of life can be read only in solitude.

II

We must learn to listen, as does the tree, to the voice of life. Only silence can aspire to the lost nobleness of life. Thoreau placed solitude and silence above social life. He equated 'living deliberately' with 'the essential facts of life'. He didn't want to live the uncertainty of other human beings. He 'wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life' (Thoreau 2000a: 86). One can live deep only in silence. All the noise and clamour surrounding us today kills our resistance to the mediocrity of civilisation. How can one think clearly and deeply when surrounded by so much meaningless noise? Ontology is noiseless. Being is like the distant light of a star, looked at in silence. Living, in a sense, is the art of looking. Perhaps if we learn how to look closely at life, we may have a better grasp of it. But we need to differentiate between life itself and what it appears to represent. It is like looking at René Magritte's famous painting overlaid with the words *'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'* [This is not a pipe]. Looking at life is never that simple or one-dimensional. We need to see beyond what is represented as life. Then what do we find? The purpose of life is neither toiling for existence, nor tears for death. The purpose of life is life itself. We were born with the love of life; with this love of life we shall die. This is our destiny as human beings. Did the Stoics not conceive of the philosopher as someone who knew how to live consistently with destiny instead of struggling in vain to satisfy passing wishes and desires? Perhaps we should go back and read more of our Stoics in order to recognise that very few in history did come close to finding the meaning of

life—the ideal state of the wise man. It's a pity that humanity no longer feels the necessity of producing Stoics. Nothing is more unfamiliar to the herd of men we see today than a page of Seneca or Marcus Aurelius.

If one wishes to be a Stoic one cannot conform to the ways of today's world. Nothing is more difficult than being a Seneca or a Marcus Aurelius in a world suffering from what Schopenhauer called 'an inner vacuity of soul' (Schopenhauer 1901: 18). However, Stoics have their fame among the greats who followed them. They are above our shallow criticism and our futile indifference. Seneca only saw truth and beauty. We are in search of truth because we want to become celebrities. This is the vital difference between us and him—Seneca was in search of truth in order to become unknown to the herd of men. Seneca wrote:

> What's the most complete span of life, you ask? To live until attaining wisdom. Whoever reaches that goal ends at a point no furthest, but greatest. Let that man rejoice boldly in the truth, and give thanks to the gods, and to himself among these; let him credit the cosmos for his creation, and deservedly so, for he returns to the cosmos a better life than the one he got. (Seneca 2018: 50)

Humanity will always be in need of wise men like Seneca, perhaps because human beings have always struggled to encompass the meaning of life. Great thinkers command our respect because they challenge us to think and to meditate deeper about the world and about our place in the world. We always return to philosophers as we do to a pure fountain. I am inclined to say it is the same with poets. *'Toute pensée commence par un poème'* [All thought begins with a poem (quoted in d'Orsan 2015: 41)], said the French philosopher Alain (E. A. Chartier). The difference between a poet and ordinary beings is that a poet apprehends and experiences life

and the world more closely, more acutely. A poet lives with and through poetry since to live without poetry is not to live. This is a *mysterium tremedum* (as Nietzsche calls it), a profound mystery, which has been lost by our contemporary decivilising society. Only poets can offer us the possibility of transcending the basic inhumanity at the heart of our civilisation. Only poet-philosophers can return to us the lost essence of life. This is also what Thoreau seems to suggest when he writes: 'There are two classes of men called poets. The one cultivates life, the other art; one seeks food for nutriment, the other for flavor; one satisfies hunger, the other gratifies the palate' (Thoreau 2000b: 449). Seneca was more than just a simple philosopher-poet. Writing, for him, was one of the essential functions of life, one that has the stamp of greatness and can lie in the lap of eternity. He wrote: 'Merely to live is not in itself good, but rather, to live well' (Seneca 2018: 76). We need philosopher-poets to tell us how to live well, but mostly how to live silently. What gives life its dignity is the force of silence. Humans should dwell on this earth silently and poetically, as the German poet Holderlin reminds us. The essence of living is in the manner of dwelling. The more the philosopher-poet dwells, the more s/he becomes one who thinks. The philosopher-poet speaks and thinks as s/he dwells.

III

We should dwell in life by the grandeur and beauty of its essence. We should be in no hurry to 'suck out all the marrow of life. As we look up in silence to the stars, we realize that eternity is beautiful. The stars are distant and unobtrusive, but bright and enduring as our fairest and most memorable experiences' (Thoreau 2000b: 453). But while we look up at the

stars and are reminded of eternity, we must also look back to the earth on which we dwell and understand that living needs a time for ploughing and a time for gathering the harvest. We often forget just how close life is to the grammar of the earth. Let us 'remain faithful to the earth', and 'not believe those who speak to [us] of otherworldly hopes!' (Nietzsche 1968b: 125), as Nietzsche's Zarathustra says. The point I have been trying to make is simple: life is organically bonded to the essence of the earth. The earth reveals the ontological depth of humankind. We walk upon the earth much as we breathe through our lungs. For this is the secret of our being. Perhaps that is why Thoreau compares walking with a crusade, 'to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels' (Thoreau 2000c: 627). Walking amidst Nature makes us aware of what we will be missing in the near future, when we will be completely alienated from Nature by our glorious civilisation and will cease to live meaningfully because Nature will become totally servile to humankind's depthless desires. There will only be progress and no wildness and rebelliousness. And 'Life consists with Wildness', argues Thoreau.

> The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. (Thoreau 2000a: 645–646)

Let us be frank: only a philosopher-poet—who, unlike others, is unsuited to civilisational ills such as complacency and conformism—has a grasp of the wildness and unruliness of life. This is an individual who, the more they deepen their reach of life, the more they become an outsider to the loud platitudes and pretensions of civilisation. This is a person who does not dwell in deepest obscurity when the nobility of

the spirit is most endangered. One who knows how to breathe after his/her own fashion can never be forced to become servile. How can one be a free spirit if one does not know how to swim against the current? When so many do not know how to think for themselves, the only path to take is that which leads away from the multitude. And so the philosopher-poet invariably goes his/her own way. Perhaps because life is not an idle amusement. We should not use up all our inherited culture. If we want to save the art of living, we should fight for the nobility of spirit. For then we may continue thinking dangerously. All thinking is thinking dangerously. But thinking life in the name of life is more dangerous than any other thinking. It's like a Jewish survivor thinking freedom in a Nazi concentration camp. The Jewishness of the Jews survived Auschwitz possibly because 'Jews have signed a pact with life' (Steiner 2017: 32). A large part of the Jewish capacity to create lies in this 'inextinguishable pact with vitality' (ibid.). But life makes everyone answerable to it, especially those who love life and challenge it. There is no life that is not an echo of other lives. At the end of the day, life returns our challenge. But should we live the challenge of life by our servility to life, or by our love of life? The task of love today is to bring life back into our distorted lives. But love has been abandoned to relativity. So, 'the almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us' (Adorno 2005: 57). Indeed, it might be difficult for us to become another person's object of love, or to become obsessed by the existence of a human being. But how can we not love life if we want to continue living? As Simone Weil puts it, 'Love needs reality' (Weil 2005: 292). But what can be more real than life? Perhaps a life of love and compassion.

There is no religion higher than love. How can one pretend to be religious and not believe in love and compassion? There is no such thing as religion overriding love. The reason is simple:

because the most spiritual act should also be the most lovable one. We must make a choice in life—either we march to the drumbeat of pride and hatred; or we follow the beat of love, which comes to our rescue in turbulent times of uncertainty and despair. Notice, too, what is operating here in the human heart is not sexual love, which is more a desire of the Other. Here, we are thinking not in terms of desiring the Other, but being one with the Otherness of the Other. As Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, '...love is not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring. ...we love men not because we like them, nor because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some type of a divine spark...' (King 2012: 48). What King affirmed is poignantly true and tells us something about our ability to re-establish and reaffirm love in our everyday life. King knew that the only way to find a balance between life and love is through the practice of nonviolence. He believed that selfless love is essential in the action of those who choose reconciliation and peace. That is why he calls love 'the most durable power in the world' (ibid.: 54). And if we take into consideration the Otherness of the Other, then life has no blueprint other than love. As King asserted, love is the 'responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody' (King 2015: 68). Therefore, if life is nothing other than love, it is also because life is the process of finding the true path for ourselves in relation to Others.

IV

According to Albert Camus, 'there is no love of life without despair of life' (Camus 1968: 13). What he means here is that beyond the bright side of life, one must also be in love with the blinding obscurity of destiny. We cannot talk about life

and not talk about destiny. The ancient Greeks knew this quite well, and equated destiny with moral heroism. 'Know Thyself' was inscribed upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi. We also find the theme of destiny in Epictetus, the Stoic, when he asserts:

> Lead me, O Zeus, and thou O Destiny,
> The way that I am bid by you to go:
> To follow I am ready. If I choose not,
> I make myself a wretch, and still must follow.
>
> (Epictetus 2004: 22)

For the Greeks, man's place in life and the world is determined by his destiny. One must become what one is destined for. However, in contrast to ordinary humans, a tragic hero is one who knows himself and, hence, is truthful to himself. For a Greek hero, destiny and character go together. The moral exemplarity of a hero is to know his destiny and to live in truth to it. Hence, the hero must put to test his self-identity. The essence of human life can be found in Greek tragedy, which is a tragedy of destiny. Man stands powerless before destiny as the unforeseen intervenes and the successes of the protagonist are transformed into failures. The greatness of the Greeks thus lay in understanding that man was a free agent—but subject to destiny. Is there any destiny greater, more powerful than the fact that we are mortal? But this does not prevent us any more than it prevented the Greeks from living a full life. As Pindar says, 'We are things of a day. What are we? What are we not? Man is the shadow of a dream' (Pindar, in Anton and Kustas 1971: 62).

Those of us who see ourselves as the spiritual children of the Greeks believe, like Odysseus, that we have the power to shape our own destiny and abide by the consequences of our decisions. Like Nietzsche, we believe it is an individual's character that makes his/her destiny. In other words, we

believe that what happens to us is determined by what we are. Character is man's inner life. Now, if our true character lies within us, it will certainly manifest itself in everyday life. If the devil lies within, it will reveal itself, as will the angel. Greek drama shows us that men of character cannot achieve greatness without divine assistance. Perhaps because unlike the gods, human beings may be right or wrong in their actions. Look at Achilles in the *Iliad*, for instance; Homer makes a hero out of him, with a moral conscience and sense of guilt. Achilles goes through a process of self-hate because of the killing of Hector, which is finally appeased by the assurance of his own death. Homer shows his readers that life can be painful even for a hero who is tormented by guilt. Perhaps this is why Aristotle considers the *Iliad*, unlike Homer's *Odyssey*, a tragedy concerned with human emotions (what he calls *pathos*). The language of pathos present in Homer and the Greek tragedies can also be found in Shakespeare. The Homeric questions of life and destiny are also those of Shakespeare. Shakespearean tragedies are, in fact, replete with themes like love, death, time, destiny and suffering that are fundamental to the human condition and the meaning of life.

One who reads Shakespeare grasps the pulse of being human. Like for Homer's *Iliad*, one cannot talk about guilt as a form of suffering without referring to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. However, as John D. Cox underlines, 'In Macbeth, the suffering is different, because it is unquestionably deserved, and because Macbeth insists more strongly than anyone else on his deserving it, so its meaning seems transparent—fully revelatory, truly apocalyptic, and unavoidably requiring judgment' (Cox 2013: 229–230). In *Macbeth*, we have the famous lines referring to the two concepts of 'time' and 'tomorrow', which reveal the sufferings of the tormented conscience of

the principal character. Responding to Lady Macbeth's violent suicide, Macbeth reflects on his own meaningless death in the future:

> She should have died hereafter;
> There would have been a time for such a word.
> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death
>
> (Shakespeare 1887: 158)

Macbeth and Achilles both suffer in their soul because of their sense of guilt. But, even in his pain, Achilles shows the world the face of a hero. As for Macbeth, 'the face he shows the world is harsh, cruel, and utterly self-serving, revealing nothing of the torment he suffers privately, yet Shakespeare wrote the play in such a way that Macbeth reveals his suffering to us...' (Cox 2013: 233). Shakespeare masterfully reveals to us the essence of life as an inner dialogue between a guilt-ridden man and his conscience. He compels us to understand the essence of Macbeth's suffering in the form of a dialogue with the self. Through existential statements like 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' in *Macbeth*, or 'To be or not to be' in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare reveals the degree and depth of complexity of human life. One aspect of this complexity is manifested in the notion of trust. What becomes of life when there is no more trust? Can we trust a person who does not trust himself and Others? Having murdered Duncan, Macbeth can neither trust, nor be trusted ('now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in/To saucy doubts and fears'). Macbeth lives in fear, and this fear takes over his life. His fear and lack of trust—in himself and others—also mark the end of his engagement with other human beings. Shakespeare develops the realms of the ethical and the psychological together. Fear and distrust represent a typical Shakespearian moment when human empathy and human solidarity are both put at risk.

In a meaningless world, the self is confronted with a loss of ethical orientation. Human beings can lose their conscience and their humanity as defined by their sense of compassion. Compassion demands sensitivity and empathy towards the anguish and suffering of the Other. A world in which this sensitivity is totally absent is ruled by scoundrels and hypocrites. When life becomes an expression of mediocrity, there will be no place left for humane feelings. In the history of Western philosophy, Schopenhauer was one thinker who understood this when he wrote:

> Man is at bottom a wild, horrible creature. We know him merely as broken in and tamed by what we call civilization, and hence the occasional outbreaks of his nature shock us ... man yields in cruelty and pitilessness to no tiger and no hyena ... But the worst trait in human nature is the malicious pleasure in mischief which is nearly akin to cruelty ... and which appears generally where sympathy ought to find a place, sympathy, as its opposite, being the only true source of all genuine righteousness and human love. (Schopenhauer 1901: 276, 280)

According to Schopenhauer, life has no ethical significance *per se*. The ethical profundity of life, therefore, comes from the fact that 'one individual again recognizes in another his own self, his own true inner nature' (Schopenhauer 1841: 209). This brings us back to the idea of life as an experience of interconnectedness and solidarity in order to rethink and reconstruct life in relation with the ethical. Finding compassion on the bumpy road of life is the task that each individual needs to take into consideration in spite of the suffering involved in the process of living. As Schopenhauer once told an ageing Wieland in Weimar: 'Life is a *missliche*

Sache—a disagreeable thing—I have determined to spend it in reflecting on it' (quoted in Hollingdale 1970: 33). But Schopenhauer, more than anyone else, also understood that living has no sense without love and sympathy. Love is the only answer to violence. As for sympathy, it brings forth the gift of honoring the Otherness of the Other. Being sensitive to the suffering of an animal or a human being is an act of fellowship based principally on the realisation of a shared fate and a common life. Sympathy and compassion bring home the significance of the Otherness of the Other, be it an animal or a human being. It confronts us with the suffering of the Other and the fragility of life. On the basis of this dual reference to the suffering of the Other and the fragility of the act of living, humankind can bear witness to the meaningfulness of life. Seen this way, life acquires meaning as the possibility of embracing empathy and compassion against the cruel and the inhumane. All we should ask is that, in a meaningless world, we agree to reflect on empathy and to make a choice. Inasmuch as empathy represents a dialogical interconnectedness, the conjunction of giving and receiving represents a compassionate bond needed against the predominance of violence and suffering in our lives.

SUFFERING

I

Life is suffering. However, nobody can live with the idea that there is no such thing as happiness. Happiness is the opium of the masses. Without the hope of happiness, human beings are confronted by the everyday tedium and pain of living. According to Schopenhauer,

> The ordinary life of every day, so far as it is not moved by passion, is tedious and insipid; and ... soon becomes painful ... Those alone are happy whom nature has favored with some superfluity of intellect ... beyond what is just necessary to carry out the behests of their will; for it enables them to lead an intellectual life ... unattended by pain and full of vivid interests. Mere leisure ... [or] intellect unoccupied in the service of the will, is not of itself sufficient ... for, as Seneca says ... illiterate leisure is a form of death, a living tomb. (Schopenhauer 1901: 28–29)

In a life of mediocrity, illiterate leisure occupies the first place. History is full of examples of men and women who escaped the essence of life by wasting their everyday life with superfluous activities. Leisure does not necessarily contribute to the life of a community; it is more about thinking of one's own wants and desires. The Greeks used the word *idiotes* [idiot], originating

from the word *idios* [private], for one who is a private person and a common citizen, as opposed to an official. For the Athenians, an idiotes was thus someone who was not actively involved in the common political life, and was ignorant of it. As Pericles proclaims in his *Funeral Oration*: 'We [Athenians] alone hold the man who does not take part in politics to be less a person who refrains from meddling, than a person who is utterly useless' (Thucydides 1910). In the eyes of Pericles, an idiotes was a person who was not accountable, because he was not an active member of the *polis*. In a world of mediocrity like ours, the *idiotai* are the conformist and complacent citizens whose general philosophy of life is to follow the status quo. The 'illiterate leisure' of today's idiotai is to be part of the crowd. Looking at today's crowd psychology, unlike in the time of Pericles, it seems that being an idiotes is a good thing. Indeed, in a life of conformism and complacency, there is no place left for excellence. Excellence is a moral value associated with the art of living. The Greeks believed that *arete* or virtue is the expression of excellence, and it is in this sense that excellence can be considered a quality of life. Therefore, life, if it is not put on display by the mediocre and by idiots, should be approached and examined as a process of crafting excellence. If life is suffering, then humans need to excel beyond the boredom and pain of everydayness. Thus, excellence is an impulse towards transcendence. It also addresses the question of the vital ethical import of *humanitas* in a world in which there is much inhumanity.

Speaking of humanitas, one needs to understand its value as a counterweight to the given suffering of the world. It is because humanitas can convey a sense of ethical roots that we need to move towards an ideal republic of cultures where the potentiality for becoming exemplar is what is important. If Man is an animal which needs to be nurtured, then humanitas is the way to moral perfection. The humanist regards human

culture as a means to nobility of spirit or excellence. The Roman concept of humanitas by Cicero includes both humanistic and humanitarian ideals. The Greeks and the Romans, unlike us today, understood and appreciated a vision of ideal humanity. Cicero has best expressed this ideal of the nobility of spirit as a moral duty of humankind. Stoic writers, like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, called attention to the idea of the unity of humankind. Seneca referred to the words of the Roman playwright Terence, '*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*': I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me. Marcus Aurelius wrote the following in his *Meditations*: 'In what I do, I am to do it with reference to the service of mankind' (Aurelius 2004: 96). Most of the Stoics considered themselves citizens of Rome, but implied that their country was the world. The Stoic concept of humanitas thus incorporates the idea of a 'universal citizenship'. Humanism, in its effort to understand the universality of human beings, gave the highest place to philosophy as an active participation in human affairs. Strangely, the world in which we live today is set up in defiance to the greatness of philosophy and the magnanimity of the soul. In a world like ours, unlike that of ancient Greece or Rome, the idea and attitude of a cultured man or woman, who is well-versed in humanities, has the same value as that of a contemporary idiotes.

II

The eternal tragedy of masses and mobs is that they have a common capacity for stupidity, thoughtlessness, and the need for conformity and uniformity. What hangs in the balance for them is popularity and celebrity, not the search for justice, beauty and truth. Mobs are not free of emotional disturbance and, therefore, not apt for empathy and compassion, which

are the virtues of a great soul. As Cicero argues, 'We need to recognize that the great and brave soul places little value on the very things that seem impressive and remarkable to most people' (Cicero 2011: 130). This is the kind of reasoning that led Socrates to not live an unexamined life. Socrates exhorted the citizens of Athens to be concerned not for wealth and power, but for the welfare of their souls. Consequently, the Socratic idea of the cultivation of one's soul became the aim of that art of living which philosophy claims to be. Socrates' distancing from the conformist and complacent individuals of his time permitted him to follow his *daimon*, his extraordinary inner voice—inaudible to all but him—which would, from time to time, command him to change his conduct.

> According to Plato, our primary source for almost everything we think we know about the first philosopher, Socrates considered the voice to be uniquely his own, as if it were directed to him alone from a supernatural sort of tutelary spirit. A source of wonder and disquiet, the voice set Socrates apart. From the time he was a child, he felt isolated and different—an individual in a collective that prized its sense of community ... crowned by a set of political institutions that embodied the novel ideal of democracy, a new form of collective self-rule. (James 2011: 20)

Socrates' autonomous and self-examined appeal to his inner voice as the greatness of the soul was what Cicero called 'the imitation of the life of gods' (Cicero 2011: 36). The moral greatness of Socrates made of him an example of excellence and ethical integrity. His examined life was an end in itself, but more a way of questioning the truths and beliefs that were the foundation of commune life. Such, in effect, is the deep challenge posed by Socrates to his time and ours. What is there for us today to learn from Socrates? Perhaps the most

important is not what the history of ideas shows us, which is Plato's portrait of Socrates as a man of justice sentenced to death by a fanatic crowd. On the contrary, what appears to be the most important feature of Socrates is his presence as a tragic character, a philosopher of pathos who surmounts life as suffering. In Socrates, self-suffering can be singled out as the exemplary feature of a self that is cultivated.

Self-suffering in individuals like Socrates, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. is a sign of transcendence. As Socrates shows us, the self has the capacity to go beyond itself, with a fundamental shift in values. A virtuous life may best come about for one who is willing to undergo self-restraint, self-discipline and self-suffering. Socrates shows by his own example that he thinks self-restraint as a form of self-knowledge should be constantly practised and that it is beneficial for its own sake. Thus, an authentic human life involves the exercise of self-awareness, self-restraint and, to a certain measure, self-suffering. The art of living is a self-reflective awareness of life as suffering. One who cultivates this self-awareness has the capacity for self-suffering, which makes his/her life authentically human. The supreme difficulty of attaining this condition explains why Socrates is the wisest of men rather than one wise person among many others. This, then, is the sense in which Socrates can reasonably claim to have attained an art of living as a heightened understanding of the self and the Other. At this point, one might concede that Socrates' understanding of life as an examined act is also a clear commitment to ethics. Having nourished his soul by cultivating excellence all his life, Socrates knew that a life worth living is guided by the pursuit of wisdom and inviting others to self-knowledge. There is, in sum, a general agreement between Socrates' commitment to self-awareness and his clear commitment to dissent. Socrates refused categorically to violate his moral principles or what he conceived to be

the higher law. Viewed from this perspective, Socrates' philosophical dissent was clearly an art of living beyond the everydayness of life. In his art of living against mediocrity and everydayness, Socrates is

> a *philosophos* in the purest possible sense: ... he is a seeker, in quest of self-knowledge ... humbled by the recognition that he lacks knowledge about 'the greatest things'—how to live well, how to be happy, what death holds in store ... Yet because he knows that he does not know, he paradoxically is ... the wisest of Athenians. And even though he has ... no dogmas to teach, he has lived a good life, conducted by relentlessly examining himself and others ... And skeptical though he may be ... he will consistently refuse to do anything that he has found reason to regard as unjust and wrong ... (Miller 2011: 38)

Interestingly, we can also turn to some practitioners of life in modern times whose beliefs in the higher laws and in self-suffering situate them in the Socratic mode of the art of living. Thoreau makes the case for the Socratic idea of an 'examined life' when he suggests that 'the object of life is something else than acquiring property' (Stoller 1965: 49). For Thoreau, the art of living beyond suffering is the ability to account for our actions. Thoreau's reference to what he calls 'Higher Laws' is an appeal to the purity and rebelliousness of life. 'If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius', writes Thoreau in *Walden*, 'which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies ... a life in conformity to higher principles' (Thoreau 2000a: 204). The 'Higher Laws' that Thoreau discusses here concern the purity and innocence of Nature. Therefore, 'a life in conformity to higher principles' is not a life of suffering and mediocrity and boredom, but a *moral* life, which is also one with the Otherness of the Other. As Thoreau says,

> Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never fails. In the music of the harp which trembles round the world it is the insisting on this which thrills us. The harp is the travelling patterer for the Universe's Insurance Company, recommending its laws, and our little goodness is all the assessment that we pay. Though the youth at last grows indifferent, the laws of the universe are not indifferent, but are forever on the side of the most sensitive. (Thoreau 2000a: 206)

As we can see, Thoreau valourises life as both moral action and as a natural rebelliousness in Nature, which is subordinated to a life lived in conformity with higher principles. For Thoreau, 'Wildness' serves the purpose of a life lived in conformity to 'Higher Laws'.

Just as Thoreau, through his real-life experiments at Walden Pond, explored an alternate, possible art of living, Gandhi's *Experiments with Truth* is concerned not only with learning how he, as an individual, should live, but also with teaching humanity the essence of life. Both Thoreau and Gandhi criticise the material preoccupations of human society. Thoreau considers material luxuries artificial. In 'Economy' he writes: 'Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them' (Thoreau 2000a: 6). Thoreau suggests a simple, organic life based on natural morality, as opposed to an artificial code of social behaviour. Thoreau's cure for society's ills is a reunion with Nature. *Walden* is full of examples of living naturally and close to Nature. Thoreau marvels over the cycles of death and rebirth in Nature. But for him, the genuine characteristic of Nature is its *simplicity*. Thoreau recognised how important simplicity is to the spiritual awakening of humankind and maintained

that it is the condition *sine qua non* of any structural change in human civilisation.

Similarly, Gandhi, too, considered simplicity a dynamic element in the ethical becoming of human civilisation. He believed that the salvation of India depended on Indians learning to live consciously and deliberately the simple life of a peasant. Also, like Socrates, Gandhi saw nonviolence as a key mode of questioning the social and political reality of his time. He believed that this mode of questioning and resistance would enlighten the conscience of the people and appeal to their hearts. And this, Gandhi felt, was the ethical foundation of living together. This was the process of self-transformation that individuals had to go through in order to attain the art of living. In his seminal work *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi defined true civilisation as follows: 'Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means "good conduct"' (Gandhi 1938: 82). Thus, for Gandhi, the art of living was founded on two major principles: the search for Truth speaking from within, and love of the Other. Gandhi insisted on a vital element of respect for the Otherness of the Other based on a selfless and detached action of the individual. For Gandhi, this was only possible by learning the law of self-suffering as the sole remedy to life as suffering. Gandhi did not envision self-suffering as a curse or an illness. He considered it a form of moral courage and spiritual strength. According to him, this was part of every individual's self-discipline in attaining the art of living. Gandhi identified himself with the sufferings of Others through self-suffering. Gandhi's quest for the Otherness of Others could also be considered a methodology to prepare oneself for life as an outward reconciliation which went hand in hand with an inward peace.

III

By reading Thoreau and Gandhi, one may conclude that the intellectual and moral effort to turn a life of mediocrity and suffering into an art of living necessitates the strength of love and the practice of self-restraint. Martin Luther King, Jr. can also be considered as one who followed the paths of Thoreau and Gandhi in defining life as a pursuit of dignity and excellence. Six months before he was assassinated, King shared his views on this subject with a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia on 26 October 1967:

> I want to ask you ... : What is your life's blueprint? ... I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life's blueprint. Number one ... should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebodiness ... Secondly, ... you must have ... the determination to achieve excellence ... And finally, [there] ... must be a commitment to the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice ... However young ... you have a responsibility to seek to make your nation a better nation in which to live ... And so you must be involved in the struggle of freedom and justice. (King 2015: 65–68)

Indeed, what King pointed at is that each person has an intrinsic dignity and worth in life. But each person also has a vocation, and that is to make life more beautiful, more just and worth living for others. What King teaches us is to look at life through the lens of the Otherness of the Other. Therefore, at the centre of King's philosophy of life we have the law of the heart and suffering for the good of the Other. King's art of living was to establish a coalition of spirits in relation with what he called 'the interrelated structure of all reality' (King 2015: 128). The genius of King was in offering humanity an art

of living built on the Aristotelian idea of 'civic friendship', and thus, in creating a new image of humankind: a people capable of compassion and justice who could overcome their evils of arrogance, pride and prejudice.

Consequently, for King, living is also an art of struggle. Indeed, King was a reader of Hegel, and accommodated Hegelian philosophy within his Gandhian moment of nonviolent strategy by expanding and reinterpreting Hegel's dialectic of 'Master and Slave' to make it fit with Jesus' principle of 'Agape love'. One of the most famous chapters of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the one on 'Lordship and Bondage' or 'Master and Slave', which Hegel saw as essential to the development of consciousness. Readers of Hegelian philosophy are familiar with his concept of 'freedom', which he regarded as integral to human history. For Hegel, every phase of human life and reason reveals an impulse towards freedom—the most precious and most sacred possession of man. For Hegel, modernity emerges as a moment in history, as a rupture of sorts where humanity realises the truth of its being free. History is thus regarded as the domain of rationality where human freedom *realises* itself, and where human reason *actualises* itself. Hegel does not proceed automatically from freedom as arbitrariness to genuine freedom. He recognises an intermediate stage where the individual is examined in terms of the forms governing his relationship to other individuals. This is necessary as Hegel regards self-consciousness as *desire*: the desire for self-verification in (and by) an Other. This desire necessitates the redoubling of self-consciousness, wherein the 'I' confronts the 'Other' to become 'We'. Hegel deems this interaction between the Self and the Other as a lifelong process of interaction and affirmation. This represents the significant stage of recognition (*Anerkennung*) where there is realisation that one's actions and ends are not one's own without the mediation of Others—one's experience

of independence is itself achieved through negotiation and interaction with the Other. Consequently, self-identity is reinterpreted as an intersubjective self-identity. Freedom at this stage is self-consciousness only *in* or *through* the Other. Like Hegel, King viewed life as an inevitable dialectical process leading to the extension of the boundaries of freedom. For Hegel, the relation of the Self to the Otherness of the Other is one in which one consciousness immediately recognises itself in another. However, in Hegelian philosophy, recognition of the Other is purely by historical and dialectical necessity, not by empathy or love. Yet, the essential nature of consciousness is simply to live or to be for another consciousness, because it realises that it cannot survive without the love of the other consciousness. Simone de Beauvoir's reading and interpretation of Hegel would be useful here to understand the mutually empathetic relationship between the subject and the Other. As Beauvoir puts it,

> Authentic love would be based on the reciprocal recognition of two liberties; each of the lovers would then experience themselves as self and as other; neither would abdicate their transcendence, neither would mutilate their being; both would disclose their values and ends together. Love would be for the one and the other the revelation of the self through the gift of self and enrichment of the universe. (Beauvoir 1952: 677)

Beauvoir's understanding of the relationship between the two is not dialectical; it is existential. To Beauvoir's existential reading of Hegel we can add that the reciprocal recognition in the two representations of consciousness transcends the Hegelian struggle to control Nature and confront death, and becomes an act of love and empathy. The art of living is founded neither in the instinct of survival nor in the act

of domination and conquest, but in a gesture of love and empathy towards the Otherness of the Other.

IV

In the three thinkers we mentioned previously, Thoreau, Gandhi and King, it is not the struggle for survival, but love and compassion for the Other which is fundamental. In sum, the art of living together is neither pursuing a herd mentality nor following the motto of 'Might is Right', but to look within oneself in regard to the otherness of the Other. Living is a matter of nonviolent organisation of the world, with the aim of becoming more empathetic and interconnected. This is why Gandhi affirms, 'I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible' (Gandhi 1921). This statement of Gandhi has relevance to the art of living in a global world. This is where a civic friendship and compassionate fellowship can grow between individuals from disparate worlds. As for King, he believed we live together because we all share a universal human dignity. Both Gandhi and King pursued the ideal of a dialogical and compassionate community. And, for both Gandhi and King, a compassionate community is one that has the 'will to suffer' for Others. According to Gandhi,

> Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason ... if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword. (Gandhi 1980: 118)

Therefore, the experience of suffering for the Other is closely related to modes of participation in common concerns and community-engendering values. It takes place in the public sphere, as the realm of common action (what the Greeks called *koinonia*), and not in solitude. Suffering for the Other does not have a meaning outside the shared space of commonality and mutuality; it is something that should be performed and observed. Thus, suffering for the Other is a rich and fascinating public performance which lights up the dark corners of human nature. Of course, not all theorists and practitioners of the political believe in the force of a compassionate community and the role played by the concept of suffering in the art of living. For a political theorist like Arendt, the ethic of compassion is of no political significance. Unlike Gandhi, King and Dalai Lama, who derive political decision-making from the primacy of the ethical over the political, Arendt makes it clear in *On Revolution* that the ethic of compassion is of no political significance. According to her,

> Compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located; it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.... As a rule it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence. (Arendt 1963[1990]: 86–87)

Despite Arendt's pessimism regarding the efficiency of nonviolence in a political realm, we should not forget that nonviolence has been the generic constituent for any dialogical rules of civility and decency. Only a truly moral and inclusive conception of civic citizenship, which listens and speaks to the Other with empathy and compassion and which learns from the past, can reverse the meaninglessness and thoughtlessness of the de-civilising process we are currently going through. The truth is that most of the barbarities in the world are sustained in the name of a reductionist view of civilisation and humanity. Pluralist dialogue, understanding and civic friendship are possible only where there is genuine empathy and a capacity to listen to the Other. Only a compassionate suffering for the Other can help us resist violence and evil. That is why, for a thinker like Albert Camus, the Otherness of the Other can only be honoured by a genuine responsibility and resistance in the face of evil. As he writes in his *Fourth Letter to a German Friend*,

> I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself. And it has no justification but man; hence he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life. (Camus 1995: 28)

Camus' emphasis on the meaning of life finds points of convergence with the ethics of the Other in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' claim to locate transcendence in the face of the Other seems to be a fruitful path to place the suffering self in a posture of empathy and responsibility. Levinas takes the absolute Otherness of the Other as an ethical event which transcends violence. Levinas' approach to responsibility as a selfless and non-reciprocal act is a true

reminder of Gandhi's idea of suffering for the world. Levinas' insistence on the Otherness of the Other as a break with the centrality of power and an acknowledgment of the limits of violence and the possibility of empathy and compassion provides us with a satisfactory answer to the ethical essence of the art of living. In other words, there is no art of living beyond everyday suffering, unless humanity learns to live rightly to put an end to the wrongs of life.

DYING

I

There is no art of living without an art of dying. One cannot live if one does not know how to die. Therefore, not every death manifests the art of dying, much the same way that not every life embodies the art of living. Interestingly, in one of modern philosophy's most famous propositions—*Cogito, ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am—Descartes' thinking 'I' asserts its existence and identifies itself with the life of the mind, but not with death. Descartes' self-knowing ego has knowledge of itself only in terms of thinking and living. Nowhere does Descartes affirm the death of the thinking subject, nor does he say: 'I am, therefore I shall die'. He was not interested in a dead *ego cogito*. Nor, significantly, was he interested in Others, for the Cartesian 'I' affirms its existence without affirming or acknowledging the existence of Others. But for many philosophers who came after Descartes (Hegel, for example), the very possibility of *cogito* was provided by the being of others. Being-for-others was, for Hegel, indispensable to one's conscious being as self-consciousness. Sartre took the Hegelian proposition further and asserted that our relation to Others is fundamentally the relation between being and being, and not the relation between knowledge and knowledge (Sartre 1943: 284). Descartes only guessed the

death of the Self and of Others, while Sartre affirmed both the existence and the death of Others.

The Other is the entity through whom I experience death. When the Other dies, I come to the conclusion that I will also die. I will experience my 'Being-toward-death'. As Heidegger argues in his seminal work *Sein und Zeit*, 'Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety' (Heidegger 1926: 310). However, Emmanuel Levinas disagrees with Heidegger on the idea of anxiety. For him, the real fear comes from the loss of the Other. 'Fear for the other person does not come [turn] back [in]to anguish over my death', affirms Levinas (1998: 131). This brings us to the conclusion that we cannot fear our own death, because, as Freud says, 'it is impossible to imagine our own death ... whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are present as spectators' (Freud 1955: 289). How can one be a spectator of one's own death? But even if dying is a solitary act, the art of dying is part of our Being with Others. Our experience of death through the death of the Others is an experience of empathy and compassion which transcends the idea of death as 'nothingness'. However, as Freud astutely observes,

> The civilized adult also likes to avoid entertaining the thought of another's death lest he seem harsh or unkind ... Least of all ... if this event is connected with a gain of freedom, wealth, or position ... We ... stress upon the unexpected causes ... and ... endeavor to debase death from a necessity to an accident ... We assume a special attitude towards the dead, something almost like admiration ... We suspend criticism ... and inscribe only what is to his advantage on the tombstone. This consideration for the dead ... is more important to us than the truth and to most of us ... consideration for the living. (Freud 1955: 289–290)

This testifies ultimately to the inability or, in a sense, refusal of humankind to confront death. What Freud is pointing to

is that the attitude of civilisation towards death has exerted a great influence on the lives of individuals through the centuries.

Every civilisation suffers and contemplates death, and every civilisation ascribes its own structural and cultural meaning to the act of dying. We do not mourn the death of others only because we feel lonely after their decease. Mourning is a civilisational gesture which reminds us that we, too, are mortal. But at the same time, every civilisation in history has also strived to think beyond and to transcend human mortality. Cicero proclaims:

> People might feel hurt and distressed at their own loss, but that's not the reason they go into mourning. Sorrowful weeping and lamentation communicate sadness that is based on our judgement that someone we cherished has been deprived of the good things of life—and senses that very loss ... But the best indication that it's natural to believe in the immortality of the soul is the deep, universal concern for what will happen after death. (Cicero 2011: 21–22)

Immortality of the soul is a civilisational response to the 'nothingness' of death. Cicero is wrong to call dying a natural attitude because Nature does not think about death, and that is why animals and plants die more peacefully (if humankind does not interfere) than human beings. For Nature, death is not suffering—it is part of its evolution. It is interesting how a transcendentalist like Thoreau, who contests the classical image of heaven, thinks of immortality in terms of Nature. In an unpublished paragraph of his *Journal* for 1843, he writes:

> The future will no doubt be a more natural life than this. We shall ... use flowers and stars, and sun and moon ... We shall ... pluck fruit from many parts of the universe. We shall purely use the earth and not abuse it—God is in the breeze and whispering leaves

> ... We live in the midst of all the beauty and grandeur that was ever described or conceived.
> ... It was here, be assured, under these heavens that the gods intended our immortal life should pass—these stars were set to adorn and light it—these flowers to carpet it. (Thoreau, quoted in Adams 1929: 65)

Thoreau relates immortality to the idea of eternity, which liberates human beings from the burden of time and history. Eternity is the terminal stop for what Thoreau calls the 'migrations of souls out of nature to a serener summer' (ibid.: 64).

II

Death is a mystery that cannot be removed from the wearing flow of life. And yet this is a bitter reality from which there is no escape. Living and dying are twins since wherever there is life, death is on the horizon, and where there is death, life is imagined as eternity. 'But eternal aliveness is what counts: what matters "eternal life" or any life!' (Nietzsche 2000: 408).

To die is to sleep in the arms of eternity; it is an experience of one's afterlife. In all of Shakespeare's tragedies we can find this correspondence between death and sleep. The idea of sleep as death and death as sleep is more than a simple dramatic metaphor in Shakespeare—it is the foundation of a philosophy of life and death. The best known death-sleep motif figure is in *Hamlet*, where Shakespeare writes:

> To die, to sleep –
> To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause. There's the respect

> That makes calamity of so long life –
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time
> (Shakespeare 2003: 97)

Hamlet is a tragedy about the meaning of life and death. It is commonly believed that Hamlet's famous soliloquy is about suicide. Hamlet is certainly a brooding, melancholic character, but he is not thinking of committing suicide. What Shakespeare wants us to understand is that our ignorance of death 'makes us rather bear those ills we have' (ibid.: 98). Shakespeare, like Homer, presents a clear-eyed and realistic vision of death.

The dominant concern of the last part of the *Iliad* is the death of Achilles. 'Achilles' knowledge of his death becomes a formulation of the telos of all heroic action, in that it represents the ultimate object of heroic knowledge' (Whitehead 1984: 122). The concept of heroic death as we find it in Homer is closely related to the concepts of bravery and nobleness. The heroic death of a character like Achilles is a direct outcome of his heroic deeds. A hero, unlike ordinary humans, confronts death bravely and with nobility. In Homer's *Iliad*, Hector meets his heroic death at the hands of Achilles.

What distinguishes heroic characters like Hector and Achilles from today's revolutionaries and terrorists is the absence of maniacal ideologies. 'The Homeric hero had no Moslem paradise to look forward to, no Valhalla where every morning before breakfast the warriors go out in full armor to fight and lay one another low merely for the play of it, an activity immediately followed by strong drink and good cheer' (Renehan 1987: 112). Where there are no heroes, there is no heroic death. We have either the meaningless death of crowds killing and dying for mindless causes or of those who are ready to kill and die with no sense of a common humanity. This is not the case with Hector, who accepts confronting Achilles in order to defend his city and not to die ingloriously, or with

Achilles, who shares a common humanity with Priam, who asks Achilles to return the dead body of Hector. As a virtuous hero, Achilles has an intuitive understanding of 'Priam's appeal to the common feeling which joins all fathers and all sons, but he carries through the same stripping away of things that divide men—nation, values, customs...' (Sale 1963: 98). Homer presents his heroes as not just brave men, but with a moral exemplarity which distinguishes them from ordinary men. It is the ontological meaningfulness underlying their capacity to engage with life and its struggles which makes their deaths heroic and momentous. There is an art of dying among all Homeric heroes that is no longer comprehensible to individuals in contemporary societies, living shallow, mediocre lives driven by consumerism.

It goes without saying that the absence of questioning the essence of life in today's world brings with it the rejection of the art of dying. The fact that the art of dying is forgotten and suppressed in our contemporary world is a sign that the consciousness of death is no longer at the heart of our philosophical questioning. Our philosophy is rooted in the simplistic and common observation that everything that is alive dies. But what makes the existential link between man and death is no longer there. Assuredly, as rational, sentient animals, we continue to be concerned with our death and the deaths of our fellow humans. But we no longer know how to think about death. However, as Schopenhauer points out, what distinguishes us from other living beings is that we live with the certainty of our death.

> The animal lives without any real knowledge of death; [and] therefore ... enjoys the absolute imperishableness and immortality of the species ... With man the terrifying certainty of death necessarily appeared along with the faculty of reason. But just as everywhere in nature a remedy, or ... compensation, is given for

> every evil, so the same reflection that introduced the knowledge of death also assists us in obtaining metaphysical points of view [which]... console us concerning death ... All religions and philosophical systems are directed principally to this end, and are thus primarily the antidote to the certainty of death ... (Schopenhauer 1966: 463)

Despite this essential difference between Man and other living beings, Schopenhauer is correct to insist that even humans don't ask questions about death as they should, and approach life as if they will live forever.

> Against the mighty voice of nature reflection can do little. In man, as in the animal that does not think, there prevails as a lasting state of mind the certainty, springing from innermost consciousness, that he is nature, the world itself. By virtue of this, no one is noticeably disturbed by the thought of certain and never distant death, but everyone lives on as though he is bound to live forever. (Schopenhauer 1966: Vol. I, 281)

Therefore, according to Schopenhauer, death for human beings is a matter of abstraction and not of sensitive experience. In other words, human beings live with an idea of death which is yet to come. To the extent that death becomes an act of the mind and does not remain only an experiential truth, it ceases to be only an end, and could be turned into an art of dying. That is to say, human beings, unlike other animals, have the capacity to anticipate death by practising the art of dying.

III

The art of dying no longer expresses the annihilation of life; it transcends the uncertainty and fragility of human life. From

this point of view, death, far from being the opposite of life, completes it in a truly meaningful way. This simply means that humans have the ability to go beyond the fear of death, as Schopenhauer eloquently explains:

> The fear of death is ... independent of all knowledge, for the animal has it, although it does not know death. Everything that is born already brings this fear into the world. Such fear of death, however, is a priori only the reverse side of the will-to-live, which indeed we all are. ... Thus it is this fear of death, and not the mere avoidance of pain, that shows itself in the anxious care and caution with which the animal seeks to protect itself, and still more its brood, from everyone who might become dangerous. (Schopenhauer 1966: Vol. II, 465)

But what Schopenhauer tries to teach us is that this fear of death is something fictitious, because death is not really a threat to our essence. Birth and death are both daughters of the same mother—the will. 'Birth and death', writes Schopenhauer,

> belong only to the phenomenon of the will, and hence to life; and it is essential to this that it manifest itself in individuals that come into being and pass away, as fleeting phenomena, appearing in the form of time, of that which in itself knows no time, but must be manifested precisely in the way aforesaid in order to objectify its real nature. Birth and death belong equally to life, and hold the balance as mutual conditions of each other, or ... as poles of the whole phenomenon of life. (Schopenhauer 1966: Vol. II, 275)

In other words, philosophical questioning does not call for another world; on the contrary, it underlines the rigorous insignificance of this world, reduced to blind functionality.

Following the path of Schopenhauer, we can define the art of dying neither as an escape from the world, nor as a passage to a harmonious elsewhere, but as a deeper search into the essence of life and death. With Schopenhauer we stick to the awareness of the true dimension of life and death. Schopenhauer presents death as a reality inherent in life itself. He thus provides us with a key to the understanding of life and death as existential stages in the service of the absurdity of the will to live. Becoming aware of this absurdity is a step towards the ethical stance of humankind. The art of living and the art of dying complete each other in the act of empathy and compassion.

Compassion is a moral sentiment that guides us to share the suffering of others in life and death. Compassion should, therefore, play a key role in the art of living and the art of dying. This act of co-suffering enables us to have love for life without having contempt for death. In other words, compassion is virtue struggling on behalf of equality, for no virtue is honourable if it is devoid of justice. As Cicero says, 'Virtue, from which respect follows, is not to be underestimated' (Cicero 2011: 95). Compassion is respecting the suffering of the Other, without necessarily having pity for that person. But there is also respect in the art of dying. A state apparatus which morally approves and lawfully validates capital punishment is neither moral nor lawful. It banishes life and disrespects death. Murdering another, even an enemy or a criminal, dishonours the art of dying. Albert Camus understood this quite well when he wrote:

> If society justifies the death penalty by the necessity of the example, it must justify itself by making the publicity necessary. It must show the executioner's hands each time and force everyone to look at them—the over-delicate citizens and all those who had any responsibility in bringing the executioner into being. Otherwise, society admits that it kills without knowing what it is saying or doing. Or else it admits that such revolting ceremonies can only excite crime or completely upset opinion. (Camus 1995: 187–188)

That is why Camus insists on the factor of compassion in the act of dying. He writes in *Reflections on the Guillotine*: 'There is solidarity of men in error and aberration ... and if justice has any meaning in this World, it means nothing but the recognition of that solidarity; it cannot, by its very essence, divorce itself from compassion' (ibid.: 217). Camus is well aware that compassion does not exclude violence from the world, but he is confident that it will be able to suspend its human expression. But to do this, compassion must be understood as 'awareness of a common suffering and not a frivolous indulgence paying no attention to the sufferings and rights of the [others]' (Camus 1995: 217). Camus' ideas about life and death are always concentrated on the idea of 'justice as balance' as a response to human excesses in history. The greatest contribution of Albert Camus' philosophy for our times is his refusal to connect the art of dying with murder. His famous essay 'Neither Victims nor Executioners' offers a forceful response to those who justify murder in what Camus calls a 'century of fear':

> All I ask is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice. After that, we can distinguish those who accept the consequences of being murderers themselves or the accomplices of murderers, and those who refuse to do so with all their force and being. ... Over the expanse of five continents throughout the coming years an endless struggle is going to be pursued between violence and friendly persuasion ... the only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions. (Camus 2006: 275–276)

Camus, therefore, bears witness compassionately to the suffering of humankind, but he also devotes his life to understand the art of dying. Camus affirms the ethics of mutual recognition as a primary virtue in life and death. Therefore, for Camus, compassion is what restores meaning to life in the midst of death and disaster. One needs to read Camus' famous novel, *The Plague*, to understand his deep sense of co-suffering and compassion. The dialogue between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux after they both witness the agonising death of an innocent child is revealing:

> 'I understand,' Paneloux said in a low voice. 'That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.' Rieux straightened up slowly. He gazed at Paneloux, summoning to his gaze all the strength and fervor he could muster against his weariness. Then he shook his head. 'No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.' (Camus 1947: 169)

What makes Camus' literary and philosophical contributions unique is that in his novels like *L'Etranger* and *La Peste*, human beings do not have the infallible capacity to make absolute judgements about life and death. According to Camus, 'No one among us can pose as an absolute judge and pronounce the definitive elimination of the worst among the guilty, because no one of us can lay claim to absolute innocence' (Camus 1995: 222).

IV

If human beings do not possess an angelic nature, how can they live and die morally and die nobly? Why does morality exist

in the art of living and in our approach to dying? Humans are no angels. In the *Book of Genesis* (3: 5), God was determined to keep what is divine separate from what is human. That is why God forbid Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because if they did so, they would become divine. But the desires of Adam and Eve made them transgress the boundaries between the divine and the human. And God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. As a result, their pursuit of the objects of their desire caused humans immense suffering. From that day on, humanity has looked into its heart rather than up at the sky for answers to moral and ontological questions. To be sure, religious or not, we are left with two basic questions: 'How are we to live' and 'How are we to die'. By what standards should we conduct our lives and how should we prepare for our deaths? Freud has the last word on this: 'Life is impoverished, it loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked. It becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation' (Freud 1955: 290).

Dying in a car race is not the same as dying like a Japanese samurai. There is no honour or loyalty involved in car racing, as there is in the performance of *harakiri* or *seppuku* (to call it by the Chinese term) by a samurai. In the act of harakiri the most important is not only the duty of suicide for the sake of preserving honour, but also the duty of suicide as a moral gesture. The duty of self-sacrifice demands a moral courage which is absent in the act of killing oneself out of despair. Unlike many suicides in contemporary consumerist society, which are often because one has failed in love or has lost a job, the samurai's art of dying is an expression and an affirmation of life. Suicide could be a noble act if it is accompanied by a moral interrogation. Loyalty and courage are two heroic principles which are not often found among the masses. The main difference between a natural death and the duty of

dying is that the latter contributes to the meaning of life. In many societies, death has become as meaningless as life is. People die namelessly on hospital beds in the same way that they have lived pointlessly every day in an office room from nine to five. Assuredly, one should ask the question: why is the modern social being not humiliated in the way s/he lives and dies? Perhaps because the concept of 'shame' no longer has such a strong signification in Western societies, as has been the case in a society like Japan, or perhaps because it means something different in the West. One must have lived in Japan or have been in touch with Japanese culture to be able to understand the true spirit of loyalty and honour, as it was practised by the samurai. For many traditional Japanese, loyalty to what gives meaning to one's life is more important than life as suffering. The art of dying nobly and courageously is a moral power of incalculable worth. The reason is simple: there cannot be an art of dying without a code of behaviour, or let us call it a way of dying heroically. In fact, one of the most troubling problems in our meaningless modern modes of being is the absence of any ethical code or standard for living and dying.

In post-war Japan, we find a deeply intriguing individual like Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), the famous writer, playwright and actor, who strongly articulated, and lived, the samurai code. Mishima wrote an entire book on the *bushido* code, titled *The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*, which was published three years before his public ritual suicide on 25 November 1970. 'As Mishima sees it, the cure for Japan's modern ills is a return to a traditional, manly samurai way of life that is defined first and foremost by an approach to death' (Mason 2011: 79). Mishima's preoccupation is certainly first and foremost aesthetic; he sees a beauty in the act of dying heroically that we rarely do in life. But he is also trying to save the art of dying through the tradition of samurai valour and

the beautiful. For Mishima, the art of dying goes hand in hand with the art of beauty. Thus, Mishima affirms,

> What is beautiful must be strong, vivid and brimming with energy. This is the first principle; the second is that what is moral must be beautiful. (Mishima 1978: 84)

In a manner similar to that of the ancient Greeks, Mishima sees a link between the aesthetics of *seppuku* and the ethics of death. In his eyes, the samurai is, therefore, 'a *total* human being' (ibid.: 72; emphasis added). The idea that Mishima tries to convey through his work is that the only way to glorify an art of dying is to die in a manner of a true Japanese warrior. Mishima's commitment to a heroic death is a way for him to consolidate the moral fabric of Japan. He once said that, 'Dying for a great cause was considered the most glorious, heroic, and brilliant way of dying' (*Japan Today* 2014).

Mishima's *seppuku* in 1970 shocked many Japanese and Westerners. Yet, in his act of dying violently, Mishima was performing a traditional samurai ritual, which would give meaning both to his life and his death. He wanted to close the final chapter of his experiments with life and beauty with an art of dying which reminded him of the glorious time of the samurai when individuals knew how to cultivate beauty and truth. He wanted to die beautifully and truthfully, before perishing of decay. This was his way of resisting both meaninglessness and mediocrity.

RESISTING

I

Living a meaningful life is resisting mediocrity. Man's weakness comes from not knowing that he need not live a mediocre life. Mediocrity is perfectly safe in a world where the line between truth and lie is no longer clearly defined. As Pascal sublimely argues, 'Truth is so obscured nowadays and lies so well established that unless we love the truth we shall never recognize it' (Pascal 2008a: 97). What Pascal calls 'lies' are false judgements that human beings make about themselves. According to Pascal, regarding oneself over and above everything and everyone else spares no one, including those who give themselves the appearance of generosity. This is what Pascal calls the 'disease of the soul' (*la maladie de l'âme*). Pascal is making us aware that human beings need to use their reason to be able to avoid indulging in both self-aggrandisement or humiliating oneself in abasement and self-loathing. But then, reason will also fail at times, because where humanity succeeds in conquering its pride in being great, it will also be on the brink of distress and self-doubt. This is what has happened to the modern man. All the dignity of modern man comes from his thinking, and yet thinking has turned out to be his last lifeline. The trouble is that modern

man can no longer find within himself his own ethical essence and truth. This ethical truth is not situated in a transcendent elsewhere, but within man's heart. 'I say that the heart loves the universal being', writes Pascal, 'and itself naturally, according to its own choice. And it hardens itself against one or the other, as it chooses. You have rejected one and kept the other: is it reason that makes you love yourself?' (Pascal 2008b: 158). The heart, therefore, is the moral seat where humanity can attempt to grasp itself in all its bewildering difference and universality. For it is through the heart that we can truly reach the Other, feel what the Other is feeling, empathise. Empathy is a universal value which lights up a path to the otherness of the Other. And as the flow towards mediocrity intensifies in today's world, the call for empathy becomes more urgent.

The universal potential of empathy to transform the human heart can align it towards understanding the Other, with a critical perception of the world in which we live. Empathising with the Other can promote dialogue, thereby contributing to the reflexive capacities of citizens. But, an empathetic stance could also invite us to critically engage with the universal logic which claims to rule minds and shape opinions. In other words, the necessity of listening to the Other does not necessarily mean that one should accept the general ambient mediocrity. A democratic life does not necessarily mean that everyone should be subject to the opinion of everyone else. The art of living together is not necessarily searching for recognition and acceptance in a state of conformism and mediocrity. This is certainly not in contradiction with what was said previously on compassion and the idea of suffering for the Other. Love for others is the highest form of autonomy, without any subjection to mediocrity. It is the capacity of autonomous and non-servile human beings to realise their sense of compassion and

empathy through their relationship with others. Therefore, one can practise an altruistic humanism without necessarily joining the mass culture. This alliance between empathy and criticality is present among many Western and non-Western thinkers and practitioners of freedom. The best example who comes to mind is Voltaire.

An advocate of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, a critic of intolerance and religious dogmatism, Voltaire distrusted at the same time the judgement of the masses. He believed that only an enlightened authority could put an end to the idiocy of the masses. In a statement, found in the Miller papers at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, he wrote:

> It seems absolutely necessary that the wise men defend themselves, and they can only be justified by enlightening men; they can form a respectable body instead of being united members that fanatics and fools chop to pieces. It is a great shame that philosophy cannot do to us what it did to the ancients; it brought men together, and superstition alone has this privilege with us. (Voltaire, cited in Wade 1969: 766)

Voltaire always fought the fanatical and obscurantist spirit, what he called *'l'infame'*. Towards the end of his days, Voltaire came to the conclusion that the spread of the spirit of the Enlightenment from the educated classes to the masses could free all mankind from fanaticism. He was against all forms of fanaticism, both religious and secular. But he knew how to distinguish between what belongs to the collective and what belongs to the individual. Voltaire was a man of spirit. Spirit belongs to the individual, as does faith. Religion is for the masses. Today, we live in mass mediocrity, and Voltaire championed individual creativity. What Voltaire teaches us is how to find the link between the art of living and dissidence.

II

Dissidence is a form of creative resistance. To resist is to create dangerously and to create is to be a dissident. The true art of living is that of dissidence, because life is all about thinking and living against the tide. The art of living is the art of dissenting. The word 'dissent' derives from Latin *dissentire*, which means 'to feel apart'. But the term does not describe a situation of selfishness and self-centredness. Standing alone against the conformist and the complacent is not an act of selfishness—it is an expression of dissidence. Those who walk against the tide are not misanthropists. They do it for the love of humanity to which they belong. Their reward is their creation. Nobody can enslave them and they are not easily brought into servility or subservience. This is where the art of living finds its complete sense. One lives to give meaning to one's life. A meaningless life is not a noble life, so it is not worth living. Living as a slave is to suffer history, not to create it. That is why crowds do not make history; they only live it as white pages. But a dissident is one who makes history, because those who resist always look at the stars, even when they are confined to the bottom of a well. A dissident remains a dissident even in a dungeon, because s/he can live through the mind. And one who thinks can never be enslaved. One who thinks must think alone, for that is the only way to extract the meaning of life. Walt Whitman, the great American poet, put it beautifully:

> Oh me! Oh life! ...
> Of the endless trains of the faithless, ... the foolish,
> Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
> Of eyes that vainly crave the light, ... of the struggle ever renew'd,

> ... Of the empty and useless years of the rest ...
> The question ... recurring—What good amid these,
> O me, O life?
>
> *Answer.*
> That you are here—that life exists and identity,
> That the powerful play goes on, and you may
> contribute a verse
>
> (Whitman 1995: 250)

What Whitman means here by 'contribute a verse' is to give meaning to life, make sense of it for oneself, and the world at large. Needless to say, poets, more than anyone else, contribute to the meaning of life. Poetry is the music of life, and poets are the musicians of our lives. Only poetry can aspire to the lost meaning of life. Where meaning fails, nothing can be. Sometimes, even words cannot articulate this failure. This is what Arnold Schoenberg gives us in the second act of *Moses und Aron*: 'O Word, thou Word, that I lack' (quoted in Stuckenschmidt 2011: 347).

Quite often, resisting is an act of silence. Horror defies language, but the unspeakable is also part of the art of living and the art of dying. George Steiner is right when he says that, 'The truths of torture, of mass extermination, of sadistic humiliation, the methodical subtraction of the human mind and body from any recognisable identity—millions of women, men and children shrunken to the "walking dead"—have defied intelligible articulation, let alone the logic of understanding' (Steiner 2011: 197). Poets, writers and philosophers may not be able to put in words the horrors of Auschwitz, Kolyma, the Cambodian killing fields, Hiroshima, Nagasaki; but they can be silent witnesses to the downfall of the human condition. Accordingly, the transformative nature of writing corresponds to the construction of a concrete world from the point of view of a moral aesthetics. This commitment to writing, while trying to understand the canonical texts of human civilisation,

is an effort towards critical thinking in our age of mediocrity. By living and thinking against the current, a dissident is distinguished as an unsettling thinker. Consequently, the wager of the dissident is to be able to transform one's life experience into consciousness. That is why dissidence is an activity which needs to be differentiated from radicalism and from the inflated idea of the public intellectual. Radicalism can give way to totalitarianism, while being a dissident is to be a custodian of difference and of defeated ideas. Dissidents often fight for lost causes, but then assuredly, lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for.

III

What is more important in an individual's life than the choice to resist reality? The choice to resist is one of the essential marks of human freedom, which refers particularly to the power to choose what one judges to be the best on the path of life. It is, therefore, in the experience of resisting that human beings discover their experience of life. One who chooses to resist is choosing in the name of all. This is the deep meaning of being free. One is never just free for oneself; one chooses to be free as a human being. As Sartre puts it, 'When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men' (Sartre 2001: 29). We can add to this that an individual's life is the sum of all the possible choices available to her/him. But the most important among all these is the choice of remaining free to choose. The freedom to choose is the essence of being human. 'In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given, it is being perpetually made'

(ibid.: 40). Linked to human existence, the choice of resisting constitutes an important moment in the justification of human freedom. Every resistance is ultimately a choice insofar as it is free and contingent. But it is not a choice that results from a necessity or a calculation of reason. Even if we decide not to choose to resist, we are still making a choice—that of passivity or acceptance of the meaninglessness of the world as it is. But resisting is a choice of constantly transforming and transcending the meaninglessness of the world. Choosing to resist is therefore giving value to the art of living. As mentioned previously, we never live only for ourselves, even if we think by and for ourselves. Therefore, we choose to resist that which has universal value to us, namely human mediocrity. Our choice is therefore neither completely arbitrary nor completely indeterminate. It is done in the name of a certain humanism.

Resisting the meaninglessness of the world is not necessarily the destruction of the Other. On the contrary, it is an urgent need to reaffirm one's freedom to think and to engage with the Other. In other words, resisting the unfree and the unjust is the highest moral action in human society. Resistance and dissidence are based on a critical re-examination and re-evaluation of the human condition. Though we can acknowledge that resistance as a mode of questioning has retreated in our world, we can yet assert that dissidence could be a moment of this retreat where moments of rethinking are recreated. This dissident act of questioning is different from our habitual practice of asking questions. Dissident questioning is integral to the art of living in that it is itself the life of a critical mind and the work of a noble spirit, a self-reflecting subject who goes beyond any closure at the level of thought. That is why dissidence is a mode of resistance which needs to be differentiated from any form of extremism or maximalism. A dissident is one who resists—from the Latin

resistere, meaning 'to take a stand'—who stands back and says no to complacency, conformism and mediocrity. Resistance as a mode of life is where critical thinking and dissenting action come together in order to explore new vistas of change and exchange, to find and to create new meanings. The act of resisting teaches us an art of living and a state of being worth fighting for, because this is also where human autonomy and freedom lie. Without resistance, autonomy and difference, humanity is left with the void of unquestioning mediocrity, sameness and uniformity, which pretends, in the guise of universality, to create history and civilisation. Let us not forget that passing for gods is but immature human arrogance, which takes us close to the anti-humanist project of the Nazi concentration camps.

Immaturity is a constant threat to the life of democracy in particular, and to the art of living in general. Unlike the dissident, who has always stood against the tide by using his/her creative mind, the 'crowd man' has always applauded the immaturity and infantilism of the masses and crowds by promoting conformity, 'littleness' and 'pettiness' as moral standards of living together. Today, every nation on earth is endangered by the immaturity of these crowd-pleasing men who search for the foundations of truth in the ovations and applause of the masses, rather than in an ethics of excellence, integrity, compassion and nobility of the spirit. A commitment to the process of maturation of humanity produces an openness to the future while simultaneously being an exercise in 'measuredness'—*la mesure*, as Camus likes to call it. This measuredness of dissident resistance, unlike the excesses of a 'crowd man', is neither apocalyptic nor eschatological. It also distances itself from the two extreme temptations of crowd pleasers posing as messiahs: to promise universal happiness, and to sink into nihilism. We must not forget that the horrors of history have often been the outcomes of great mystical and

mystifying impulses which are falsely presented as ways and means of human salvation. That is to say, one who is looking for a redemptive heroism at the end of the tunnel is also ready to sacrifice humanity for a murderous history which transcends human destiny. Let us be clear: one cannot be on the side of history if history is on the side of the Gulags, the gas chambers and all other atrocities committed in the name of a radiant future. The truth is that the future is never radiant, though it can either be more shadowy and dark, or less so. What we learn by looking at history is that shadows are inseparable from light just as decivilisation is inextricable from civilisation. But in confronting the shadows of history, we need to prove that we do not deserve the violence of evil, thoughtlessness, uniformity and mediocrity. This is a grammar of resistance which is also an important pillar of the art of living.

The question then to ask is: how can we resist the decivilising process of history while learning from the moral and aesthetic signifiers of our human civilisation? If civilisation is 'measuredness', then the true battle is between mindless material progress on the one hand, and the lyrical, joyful essence of our free natural being on the other. This recognition of human joy in relation with the permanence of the earth, sea and sky is considered by Camus to be the only source of immediate happiness and deep loyalty 'to those few perishable and essential things that give life a meaning' (Camus, quoted in Hughes 2007: 154). In his Mediterranean philosophy, he establishes a dialogue with what he sees as the essence of the Mediterranean land, its people and culture. Camus describes the essence of the Mediterranean as a living culture where everything is timeless and universal. This timelessness and universality of the Mediterranean culture is where, according to Camus, we can discover the foundations of the human condition, and of civilisation itself. Camus is

conscious of the fact that the 'measuredness' of civilisation can open the way towards a human solidarity, serving as a key to the inclusion and recognition of the otherness of the Other. This recognition of the Other is neither a matter of pity nor of charity, but that of compassion, which takes into account the physical and spiritual pain and moral harm inflicted upon human beings by other human beings. It is this recognition and solidarity that makes it possible for human beings to transcend the evil contained in human history.

IV

'If men cannot refer to a common value, recognized by all as existing in each one, then man is incomprehensible to man', wrote Camus (1992: 22–23) in *The Rebel*. The humanist ear will at once catch the echo of his words. The root of the matter for Camus lies in the self-discovery by the individual that there is a common humanity and that there are limits which we cannot transgress without contradicting our shared moral values. This consciousness of limits necessarily excludes all forms of absolutism. Camus' rejection of absolutism seems to have a great deal in common with his humanist values of compassion and solidarity. In Camus' understanding of human solidarity, responsibility is not reducible to a messianic view of history. Thus, evil is always latent within human reality since the capacity for injustice is an intractable aspect of mankind's destiny. The key, therefore, is the moral quality of individual action, which should be an exemplar of hope for others. Camus calls on us to turn towards each other, and to turn the violence of absolutism into solidarity. In his confrontation with absolutism *à la Caligula*, Camus invites us to forge a human solidarity that we share with others when

we resist a selfish world of complacency and mediocrity. 'I resist; therefore we are' could be considered Camus' axiom in the battle against tyranny and the reign of the arbitrary. Ultimately, resistance is the task of serving the common humanity and ensuring that human dignity is accompanied by justice. Resistance is the work of love and responsibility. Here, we can see a balance between being courageous and being compassionate. That is to say, Camus rejects the idea that life is worthless and that everything deserves to perish. On the contrary, he shows us in his writings that we need to challenge human evil and darkness by bearing witness to the extraordinary beauty of this world. Following in Camus' footsteps, we can say that resistance is a creative process which rests on a certain kinship with the beauty of the world. Resistance is therefore a shared experience and a common responsibility vis-à-vis life and death.

Camus explores this theme of a common responsibility in the face of shared misery in his novel *The Plague*, where the deadly force of the mysterious disease presents the characters with the option of dying alone or practising solidarity in life and death. This is the story of the city of Oran, in Algeria, where its residents come under siege by a mysterious illness. As the population of the city is reduced to a kind of horrible imprisonment, Camus insists on the interrelation between human beings and their environment. The permanent threat of death in the novel is a reminder of the many evils that humanity has faced over the centuries: war, famine, disease. Camus incorporates the two dimensions of fiction and reality, by using the symbolism of the plague, to portray the transformation of the lives of human beings in confrontation with an evil force.

> The Plague appears, and Oran under the Plague is slowly dehumanized, stripped of the free, dynamic careless atmosphere of human living. That is why its characters are voices and attitudes which can return to the fullness of life only with the end of the Plague and the first gasp of air from the sea. (Brée 1951: 99)

What Germaine Brée is pointing at is how each of the characters of the novel, who are also potential victims of the epidemic, hope to escape the common fate of the people of Oran. But the threat of death only grows every minute, every hour and every day. Camus brilliantly captures what is a common yet not-so-well-understood human response to war and epidemic:

> Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. ... When a war breaks out, people say: 'It's too stupid; it can't last long.' But ... Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves. (Camus 1960: 34)

Camus' novel illustrates the battle between humankind and evil (of the disease) by pointing to the idea of a shared solidarity among the suffering population. From Camus' point of view, such solidarity is what restores meaning to life in the midst of the disastrous viral outbreak. Camus' heroes fight an invisible enemy, but they respond to the sense of human dignity by trying to revitalise it. Of course, Camus does not think of the outcome of the resistance against evil in terms of the masses, but only in relation to the discovery of a new truth by individuals. As he says in his *Carnets*: 'Morality of the plague: It has served no purpose or anyone. Only those whom death has touched ... or [through] their loved ones are educated. But the truth which they have thus conquered concerns only themselves' (Camus 1962: 1956; translation

mine). Therefore, Camus' novel is first and foremost a psychological examination of the conduct of individuals faced with the challenge of evil. What does the existence of evil in the world say about the human condition? Camus' non-theological yet non-apocalyptic question is also ours in an age in which late modernity has produced its own dark side.

For Camus, the philosopher, the plague is just another expression of what we can call 'the violence of death'. Once again, if we distinguish between death in suffering and the art of dying, Camus' virulent criticism of the principle would make sense. This is where he brings in the question of 'the right to kill', and writes:

> Our purpose is to find out whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved in action, can avoid committing murder. We can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us. We shall know nothing until we know whether we have the right to kill our fellow men, or the right to let them be killed. In that every action today leads to murder, direct or indirect, we cannot act until we know whether or why we have the right to kill ... (Camus 1956: 4)

Thus, the question on Camus' mind is one which we have tried to answer throughout this book: if modernity has brought humanity scientific progress, individual rights and liberties and political atheism, how is it that the moderns (unlike the ancient Greeks) are incapable of living a meaningful life, and dying a meaningful death? Consequently, faced with the agonising death of a child, the dialogue between Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux in *The Plague* is still valid in our world today. Father Paneloux tries to justify the unjustifiable sufferings of the population of Oran with the idea that evil was introduced in God's perfect world by humankind. He delivers a sermon from the pulpit of the big cathedral:

> If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff. There will be more chaff than wheat, few chosen of the many called. Yet this calamity was not willed by God. Too long this world of ours has connived at evil, too long has it counted on the divine mercy, on God's forgiveness. (Camus 1960: 95)

It is important to note that, while abandoning the Christian theological explanation and the love of God, Camus does not renounce the meaninglessness of a child's suffering and death. This is the attitude expressed by Dr. Rieux:

> 'I understand,' Paneloux said in a low voice. 'That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.' Rieux straightened up slowly. He gazed at Paneloux, summoning to his gaze all the strength and fervor he could muster against his weariness. Then he shook his head. 'No, Father. *I've* a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture. (Camus 1960: 169)

Essentially, what Camus teaches us in *The Plague* is that life is absurd, and that its absurdity is revealed in the arbitrary death and suffering of its victims. Tragedies like wars or pandemics bring people face to face with the absurd.

So what can a dissident voice of resistance do to confront the meaninglessness of life? Perhaps for those who follow an art of living, resisting absurdity, mediocrity and meaninglessness would simply mean being witness to the perennial suffering of human beings. But this act of resisting would come into effect

only as a discovery of human solidarity and as a response to the moral relativism of our time. The tragedy of the human condition in modern times is that the world is perfectly aware of its selfishness, yet it has made no attempt to overcome it. But at the end of every life is a judgement that is passed on human beings; that is why it is so heavy to bear. We all share this judgement, but we each respond to it differently. As Camus' hero Clamence says in *The Fall*: 'Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it [judgement] the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore, it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start' (Camus 1991: 133).

Solidarity is a shared judgement on the human condition. If the art of living has a meaning, it is in this solidaristic effort. The authentic art of living is that of living in a community of individuals who are ready to experiment with truth. To follow the philosophical path of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, we can say that the experience of self-sacrifice and the self-suffering of resistant dissidents leads to the creation of a solidarity of the shaken. Only a solidarity among the shaken, who are conscious of the art of living for having confronted death, can enable them to choose a meaningful life. God did not invent morality. Human beings did. But only a morality of common humanity—which is valid for all human beings at all times, unconditionally and independently of all circumstances, and which is the basis of the solidarity of the shaken—can redefine the art of living in the face of a death that we all fear.

SOLIDARITY OF THE SHAKEN

I

In the tragic and increasingly exacting battle that is taking place between humanity and its new enemy, Covid-19, the common suffering of human beings has paved the way for a broader solidarity of all individuals across all lands. A global march like this on a long and dark road is a new endeavour for humanity, perhaps the most significant since the fight against Nazism in the 1940s. Once again, in its struggle against the coronavirus, humanity has nothing to offer but toil, tears and temerity. Strangely, this new ordeal that has come upon humanity ignores state boundaries, political systems, religions and cultures. It is a child of globalisation, which also has the power to bring an end to it. As in the case of a world war, Covid-19 has closed down borders, halted travel across the globe, wiped out trillions of dollars from stock markets, killed thousands of persons, and promised more deaths ahead. The outbreak of this virus has revealed to humanity that beyond all its techno-scientific powers, the modern human being is a fragile creature. For a long time, humanity has lived with the promise of unbeatable health, even the prospect of living forever.

In order to protect human beings from uncertainties of the everyday world, modern political institutions were

developed and equipped with the power thought to be needed to guarantee individual safety. But the feeling of security that allows people to live with the trust that there is a tomorrow includes intimations of the inevitable fragility of human existence. The idea of a fragile humanity recognises an obvious aspect of our existence: the condition of being vulnerable and defenceless, as humanity is today against the Covid-19 pandemic.

The point is that this fragility did not occur suddenly and unexpectedly, as if it were the product of a short-term process. When we talk about the fragility of an object, we understand that it can break easily. We apply the word fragile to something which can easily be damaged. What this crisis reveals is a fragility inscribed in the ontological constitution of humanity. But it also shows the failing structures of our social and political life, where governments are incapable of meeting their responsibilities as the protectors of peoples' lives and wellbeing. And the belated discovery that global wellbeing can no longer sustain an indefinite happiness for people around the world deals the final blow to the belief in the unlimited progress of humankind. Global happiness is an illusion, and the sooner we recognise it as such, the sooner we will be able to address the unsolved problems of the pandemic crisis, that will otherwise overwhelm us in a near future. The fragility of humans signals their vulnerability. But it also prompts us to develop an ethic of responsibility because of that vulnerability. Humankind has considered itself vulnerable for nearly twenty-six centuries.

As the French poet Paul Valery famously wrote in 1919, 'We civilizations now know ourselves mortal' (Valery 1957: 988). In other words, our civilisation is fragile because it can, by definition, end at any moment. But the coronavirus has, at the same time, also revived a sense of empathy that was concealed for half a century by utilitarian and materialistic modes of

human life around the globe. Today, it is as if great tragedies give great meaning to the lives of those who fight for a common cause, and against death. What the coronavirus has made us discover is that we are living in what Martin Luther King Jr. called a great 'world house'. Though we are separated in ideas, interests and ideals, and despite the fact that we wage wars against each other, we cannot live apart. We share each other's joys and sorrows. We are caught in an inescapable network of interrelationships. With this new pandemic, inhabitants of the globe have become closer neighbours. This is, once again, a major turning point in our post-modern civilisation where the presuppositions upon which our technological and capitalist society has been structured can be acutely analysed and deeply challenged. In a philosophical sense, death by Covid-19 has become 'meaningless'; thousands have died around the world whose names we do not know, but what we see now is exactly what the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called the 'solidarity of the shaken'. This is the thinking of those who resist great tragedies with nothing in their hands, except their humanity.

We can deal with global tragedies, like the coronavirus outbreak, only if we learn to change our modes of being-in-the-world and doing-in-the-world. This crucial and critical renewal consists above all in always substituting responsibilities for rights. Being obsessed with rights alone means dismissing the dimension of solidarity as the art of forging a unity with others. The coronavirus outbreak has demonstrated that the fundamental right to live is suspended from the duty of each person to respect the instructions of containment. Therefore, developing a sense of solidarity with Others as part of a global citizenry is paramount as each of us is dependent on others. Tracking the question of solidarity in real life, one needs to turn to the idea of responsibility. According to John Keane,

> responsibility is the centre of gravity of the self. ... it requires the existence of a person who is responsible and someone or something for whom or for which that person is responsible. Responsibility orientates the self ... endows that self with the power to confer meaning on its relations with the wider world ... That means that the struggle to establish and cultivate responsibility is a life-and-death struggle to survive as a human being. Life is constantly threatened by nothingness. ... the power of individuals ... to fend off nothingness, depends upon their ... capacity for responsibility. (Keane 2000: 289–290)

The point that Keane is making here is with reference to the political experience of Vaclav Havel in his struggle against totalitarianism. Talking about responsibility during his time in prison, Havel uses the metaphor of a knife to 'carve out our own inimitable features in the panorama of Being' (Keane 2000: 290). For Havel, the act of carving one's human identity in a situation of confinement and concentration, which intends to suppress or destroy that very humanness and identity, is a return to the plural essence of life. The only solution to the wreckage of the self that Havel sketches is to strengthen human responsibility through the notion of hope—the 'only true source' of 'the human spirit' and the only thing 'that can keep us above water' (Havel 1990: 181). As he asserts,

> Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well ... but [the]... ability to work for something because it is good ... The more unpromising the situation ... the deeper that hope is. Hope is not ... optimism. ... but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. ... something we get, as it were, from 'elsewhere.' It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and ... to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. (Havel 1990: 181)

Havel's notion of hope is to be exclusively found in his understanding of the intersection of the two concepts of truth and a responsible life. One cannot be hopeful of the future without living responsibly in truth. Therefore, 'to live within the truth is to give voice to a self which has embraced responsibility for the here and now' (Elshtain 1995: 475). The three notions of hope, responsibility and truth are, therefore, interrelated in Havel's approach to the problem of human solidarity. What we can learn from Havel is that solidarity is the moral reconstitution of social life. If anything, life rooted in hope, responsibility and truth forms the very basis of our Being as *Homo sapiens*. We are puny and fragile as living beings, but we have access to a horizon of possibilities which is closed on other species. The art of living is, for humankind, a possibility—a possibility that we need to grasp here and now (*hic et nunc*). This is the only way we can survive with the hope of defeating evil (be it social, political or philosophical) in a gesture of glorifying life non-arrogantly. Havel is most clear on this when he affirms:

> It is an arrogant attempt by human reason to plan life. But it is not possible to force life to conform to some abstract blueprint. Life is something unfathomable, ever changing, mysterious, and every attempt to confine it within an artificial, abstract structure inevitably ends up homogenizing, regimenting, standardizing and destroying life, as well as curtailing everything that projects beyond, overflows or falls outside the abstract project. What is a concentration camp, after all, but an attempt by Utopians to dispose of those elements which don't fit in? (Havel, quoted in Elshtain 1995: 477)

II

Pushed to the edge of its destiny by the pandemic, the world population has no other choice but to stand up to the crushing pressure of a meaningless death wrapped in individual sufferings. There is no way one can come to terms with a virus that can destroy entire humanity. Accepting its terms is like submitting to the logic of a Nazi concentration camp. One does not negotiate with Auschwitz, one destroys it. What makes Auschwitz unique is not only the horror one experiences as one travels along its deadly assembly line, but also the nausea and bitter taste of disgust for humanity that lingers for hours, days and months. Indeed, the most important lesson to be learnt from re-visiting Auschwitz is not just that the Holocaust is a tragic event in human history, but that it is a challenge to human morality and conscience. What is unheard of about Auschwitz is that it is not an ordinary crime of the murder of millions of human beings. Auschwitz is the failure of ethics and an aberration of the foundations of civilisation, the absolute degradation and destruction of the human condition, of what it means to be human. Auschwitz is not a historical accident or mistake—it is a trauma for human civilisation.

It would be unethical and ontologically disproportionate to compare the sufferings of the victims of Auschwitz with that of a pandemic like the coronavirus crisis. However, just as Auschwitz, with the idea of a 'Final Solution' for the Jewish people, was no coincidence and expressed the dark side of modernity, recent pandemics, and more precisely the coronavirus outbreak, are also creations of humanity's errors and arrogance. Undoubtedly, it is our responsibility to witness the consequences of the current pandemic as a way of setting limits to human wants and desires. However, strangely enough, the irony with pandemics is that moments

of grief, despair and impotence have always accompanied civilisational moments of glory, conquest and pride. As a matter of fact, the arrival of the coronavirus corresponds with the rise of populist regimes around the world, which claim to speak for the people and treat dissent as an impediment to their conception of the majority will. The truth is that each time the human race has been confronted by a deadly epidemic, it has found itself engaged in discussions about the political future of societies. The coronavirus outbreak, which is still unfolding, has already manifested the symptoms of earlier pandemics in human history, such as widespread panic, and the tendency of civilians and governments to resort to irrational, even inhuman, extremes to try and contain it.

It is impossible to know with certainty the first time a virus infected humans or when the first pandemic occurred. However, many historians agree that the three major plague pandemics in recorded history, which were followed by socio-political and economic consequences, were the Plague of Justinian (from 600 AD), the Black Death (from 1340s onwards) and the Bombay Plague (from the end of the nineteenth century). All these three pandemics deeply affected diverse human civilisations in antiquity and in the modern era. The European Middle Ages were profoundly shaped by the Plague of Justinian, which contributed to a socio-economic paradigm shift from the classical Mediterranean civilisation to the resurgence of the barbarian invasions and the weakening of the Byzantine Empire. According to many historians, the Plague of Justinian also aided the rise of the Islamic Caliphate as a hegemonic power, although the devastation caused by the high plague mortality also struck Muawiyah, the governor of the city of Kufah in 670 AD. Ironically, as it is the case today, some of the high-ranking officers of the Umaiyad Caliphate, including Muawiyah II or the Caliph Marwan, died of plague.

Undoubtedly, the cyclical pattern of epidemics, especially the plague, in early Islamic history and in post-Byzantine Europe, served as a major factor in changing the political geography of the Middle Ages. The appearance of the Black Death pandemic in the middle of the fourteenth century was partly due to the great number of commercial routes in West Asia, Central Asia and the Mediterranean littoral, through which the disease travelled from one city to another. These pandemics strongly influenced the socio-economic attitudes as well as the religious behaviour of medieval communities. In comparison with the sudden spread of the coronavirus in today's world, the Plague of Justinian resulted in the deaths of an estimated 30 million people over two centuries, which was a death toll equivalent to 20 per cent of the world's population at the time of the outbreak.

Consequently, many today predict that humanity is not going to reach anywhere close to that level of casualties. However, the significant point of comparison that could be made between the coronavirus and the plague pandemics in the early and late medieval periods would be the psychological changes in the political behaviour and the mode of life of populations around the world. The element of fear, as a permanent emotion in all human beings, has already started altering our lives in relation with the proliferation of the coronavirus across the world. If nothing else, the virus is scary, as was the Dark Plague for those living in medieval times. However, this pandemic could also be an important catalyst in the downfall of political regimes in the Middle East or government changes in other parts of the world, as happened with the Plague of Justinian. Unsurprisingly, the coronavirus outbreak is not only a political challenge for some authoritarian regimes, it is also a major blow to their ideological legitimacy. Some regimes did their utmost to misrepresent or suppress the true extent of the coronavirus crisis. This created a total

disconnect between the political establishment and the rest of the population. In that sense, the pandemic has become the moment of truth of many regimes that lack transparency. It is not beyond imagination to think that the coronavirus pandemic might bring down regimes and governments that years of political dissent have not been able to dislodge. Let us not forget that reappearances of the plague in early medieval times had a major impact on the subsequent course of world history, including the rise to power of the Abbasid Empire and the collapse of the administrative structures of the Eastern Roman Empire. At the time, many considered the pandemic a divine punishment for human sins. The coronavirus may not have the same apocalyptic resonance, but it has certainly made populations around the globe more conscious about the competence or incompetence of their ruling elites. After all, the coronavirus is one of the most significant political disorders of our century, if not beyond.

III

The coronavirus pandemic has given us a dangerous gift: the gift of knowing that we can change our views of life and death. We learnt not to touch each other anymore and to replace the pleasure of socialisation with online communication. It is a reminder of the social situation portrayed in Ray Bradbury's book, and Francois Truffaut's film, *Fahrenheit 451*, where the television replaces human conversation and interaction. With the pandemic in our globalised world, humanity has been facing the phenomenon of 'social distancing'—considered the new dictum of morally righteous action for society. But here, once again, the utilitarian maxim of 'The greatest good of the greatest number of people' takes over the logic of our

lives. This would require a set of criteria by which to judge the value of lives of the human population around the world. Whose life is more valuable to the global system which governs the world financially, politically and militarily: the life of the American president or the British prime minister, or that of poor peasants living in the state of Bihar in India or in Peru and Bolivia? If we have no immediate answer to this question, we need to redefine the meaning of a 'valuable life'. Saving the greatest number of lives possible is not a self-evident moral premise, unless we learn to change our point of view on the art of living and the art of dying.

Social distancing and living in confinement in times of lockdown are not necessarily expressions of generosity, kindness and compassion. As demonstrated previously, compassionate altruism is always accompanied by a level of moral courage. If the act of social distancing is practised as part of medical and health protocol, it should not be taken as a heroic act. It is a normal gesture of precaution with no level of exemplarity. People do not become heroes in quest of excellence just because they wear a mask. More importantly, our world suffers from the absence of moral leadership. The pandemic, and its mismanagement by a majority of world leaders, is the best expression of this moral failure. Mahatma Gandhi showed the world that the ultimate legitimacy in social life is not political but moral, and it can neither be produced nor justified by brute force. In a world broken by a pandemic or a global conflict, moral legitimacy needs to be earned through compassionate justice and inclusive pluralism. Today, once again the management of the pandemic at the global level necessitates the reintegration of global politics within the nonviolent ethics of compassion and empathy. Let us not forget that Gandhi's idea of service to fellow human beings is a negation of the utilitarian principle of the 'greatest good of the greatest number', which leaves no place for moral empathy and social self-sacrifice.

The question which comes to mind in the present context of the Covid-19 pandemic is the following: could a period of lockdown, confinement and social distancing go along with moral empathy and compassionate justice? Lockdowns have existed throughout human history in different forms and for different reasons: to stop a pandemic, to fight against terrorism, or in the aftermath of technological disasters. Isolation, quarantine and total lockdown are recognised public health measures that have been in use for a long time. Pandemics have always been profoundly unpredictable events in history due to, in large part, the immense complexity of interactions between microbes, particularly viruses, and humans. It is by using the language of science, health and purity that modern rationality has approved and administered the creation of boundaries, gated communities and quarantines—distancing 'healthy' society from the impure or 'unhealthy' Other.

The image of the diseased person has often served as an isolation-reinforcing argument, signalling the moral and political imperatives of defending the integrity of a 'healthy nation' against all those afflicted by the disease. The interventions may vary from behavioural changes like social distancing and quarantining infected patients to regional or national lockdowns. However, it is important to understand that modernity, coupled with globalisation, has created its own dark side: pandemics like SARS and coronavirus, global terrorism and modern technological disasters like Chernobyl and Fukushima can have a worldwide impact. The advent of pandemics in the history of humankind has always been accompanied by a series of social, political and economic measures. In 412 BC, the Greek physician Hippocrates reported an epidemic that modern doctors believe was the first recorded reference of influenza. Subsequently, as mentioned earlier, there were two major plague pandemics in Europe—the Plague of Justinian (from 600 AD) and the Black Death (from

1340s onwards)—followed by socio-political and economic consequences.

Each outbreak in the West was accompanied by the implementation of health regulations as measures of containing it. Isolating plague patients was one of the measures practised in early modern Europe. A number of Italian city-states established quarantines as early as the fifteenth century to isolate the sick. The practice of confining those stricken by the plague was adopted by the European maritime powers like England and France between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. London's Great Plague of 1665 and the Marseilles outbreak in 1720 convinced the French and British administrations to enforce isolation measures in order to protect people from exposure to deadly diseases from overseas. However, most historians go back to the outbreak of 1347–48. This reactive psychology against the patients of the Black Death was underlined by the Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio in his famous book *The Decameron*:

> What gave more virulence to this plague was that by being communicated from the sick to the hale, it spread daily, like fire, when it comes in contact with large masses of combustibles. Nor was it caught only by conversing with, or coming near the sick, but even by touching their clothes, or anything that they had touched before. (Boccaccio 1881[1920]: 2)

What was described by Boccaccio at the micro-level of individual psychology in relation to plague patients produced profound economic and political changes at the level of state policies, trade and commercial relations in modern Europe. The European maritime states adopted quarantine measures as part of their general mercantilist policies, establishing monopolistic trading companies. Quarantine measures in early modern Europe not only helped to promote overseas commercial trade, they also served an important ideological

function for the European states: enabling them to stress on public welfare and safety over the private lives of citizens, and justifying the same. Also, the English public became more aware of the dangers of the plague epidemic at the end of the eighteenth century. Quarantine regulations were relaxed in the mid-nineteenth century. But the end of the plague pandemic in Europe did not mean that the world was free of infectious diseases. The modern magnitude and gravity of some widespread communicable diseases conferred upon them a social, economic and political significance outweighing those of the two World Wars in the twentieth century.

The influenza pandemic of 1918 caused 50 million deaths worldwide. Since 1957, influenza pandemics have killed a million people. With new infectious diseases such as SARS and avian flu having a disastrous influence on the global economy and international politics, many developed states around the world had to take severe measures. The outbreak of SARS in November 2002 in China infected more than 5,300 people and killed 349 nationwide. However, the SARS crisis led the Chinese government to take draconian measures to strengthen its authority while sealing off villages, apartment complexes and university campuses, and putting hundreds of thousands of people in confinement. The anti-SARS lockdown policy in China in 2003, followed by a comprehensive epidemic-control plan, taught China how to contain the coronavirus outbreak in 2020. The fact that China's aggressive measures have slowed the coronavirus does not mean that a global surveillance system for pandemic prevention has become a reality. Containing pandemics is not an easy task for governments and civil societies around the globe. Successful containment depends on many factors, including tracing exposed individuals, vaccinating the threatened population and decontaminating places and things. Individual isolation and national lockdowns have not been replaced thus far.

IV

Some of the more recent examples of lockdowns have taken place thanks to nuclear accidents like those in Chernobyl and Fukushima. The nuclear accident on 26 April 1986 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, near the city of Pripyat in the north of Ukraine, is considered the worst nuclear disaster in history. Today, nearly 35 years after the accident, it is still difficult to quantify the impact of the accident, either in terms of public health or in terms of economic and social costs. The number of victims was staggering; 650,000 workers were directly involved in fighting the fire, assisting evacuees and cleaning up. About 90,000 people were evacuated from a 30-km radius of the Chernobyl plant, which included the thriving city of Pripyat and more than 70 other settlements. Additionally, 77 administrative districts in 12 regions of Ukraine, including more than 1,500 villages, residential areas and towns, were heavily contaminated with radioactive material. Soon after the accident, the Soviet army locked down an area covering a 30-km radius from the plant. Later the radius was changed to cover a much larger area of Ukraine. Known as 'The Exclusion Zone', the locked-down area was initially divided into three subzones: the area immediately adjacent to the reactor where the incident happened; an area of approximately 10-km radius from the reactor; and the remaining 30-km zone. The radioactive contaminated area, 'The Exclusion Zone' was closed to public access and under complete military control. For more than two decades, Soviet and Ukrainian authorities maintained the zone around the reactor, including the city of Pripyat—once home to 50,000 people.

It is interesting to note that in the memory of most Ukrainians and Russians, the horrific disaster of Chernobyl was comparable to an act of war. As if the lockdown was a victory

against a foreign enemy which had invaded the country. No one has analysed this muddling of the two concepts of 'war' and 'disaster' better than Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature. In her book *Chernobyl Prayer: Voices from Chernobyl*, she argues:

> In Chernobyl, we see all the hallmarks of war: hordes of soldiers, evacuation, abandoned houses. The course of life disrupted. Reports on Chernobyl in the newspapers are thick with the language of war: 'nuclear', 'explosion', 'heroes'. And this makes it harder to appreciate that we now find ourselves on a new page of history. The history of disasters has begun. (Alexievich 2018)

Consequently, even pandemics, emergencies and lockdowns have their own heroes. Let us not forget that today—nine years after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster—the Japanese continue to consider the courageous group of firefighters, employees of the nuclear plant, and members of the Japanese Self Defense Forces their heroes. But even if disasters and lockdowns do not last forever, sometimes heroism and tragedy are put together and turn into an object of tourist attraction. It is ironic that Chernobyl, the site of the worst nuclear disaster in modern times, which resulted in thousands of deaths, is today an official tourist attraction in Ukraine. According to Greenpeace, the final death toll of Chernobyl, mostly related to cancer deaths, is estimated to be 200,000 fatalities. Chernobyl has become one of the most blatant examples of what we can call 'dark lockdown', a term associated with the death and suffering of thousands of innocent people.

Not surprisingly, most of the famous examples of national lockdowns in the past two decades around the world have been related to terrorist attacks. Like pandemics, global terrorism is a side effect of a globalised world such as ours. Eleventh

September 2001 will be forever remembered as one of the most horrific terrorist attacks in modern times. The attacks caught America and its leaders completely off guard, but it was immediately followed by a three-day lockdown of the American civilian airspace. All incoming international flights were diverted to Canada. Washington airspace restrictions were severely tightened after the 9/11 attacks, but the most severe lockdown happened in New York. Bridges and tunnels to Manhattan were closed to non-emergency traffic in both directions. As a result, there was interruption of food deliveries to restaurants and groceries. All public schools, colleges, daycares and universities in New York and Washington D.C. were also closed. The 9/11 lockdown might have been short-term, but it had long-term effects on the social, cultural and political behaviour of American institutions and citizens. It intensified anti-Muslim feelings and segregation in American cities, limited American democracy with anti-terrorist laws, extended privatisation of the public sector and restricted the use of public spaces.

These are modes of behaviour and governmental decisions which have usually accompanied nationwide lockdowns around the world. In the wake of a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris by the Islamic State organisation on 13 November 2015, the Belgian government imposed a security lockdown of four days. A terror alert across the Brussels metropolitan area led to the closure of shops, schools, public transportation and the prohibition of any gatherings for a period of four days. This is similar to the lockdown in Boston after the Boston Marathon bombing on 15 April 2013; one of the bombers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, was killed in a shootout during the lockdown.

Recent lockdowns, whether in response to pandemics, terrorist attacks or natural or technological disasters, may well have saved lives. But the act of saving lives has not generated

a revision of the morals and values of contemporary society regarding its mode of living or dying. Today, all the nameless dead, the victims of these pandemics, attacks and disasters, speak to the living and question them. Perhaps if we listen to them, we may find a way for the future.

KAIROS

The World after Coronavirus

I

The ancient Greeks regarded *kairos* as the opportune moment and the appropriate measure, as a critical point in time and space. For the Pythagoreans, kairos was 'one of the fundamental laws of the universe' (Carter 1988: 101). In the Christian worldview, kairos is seen as a 'time of blessing' when a proclamation is delivered. As members of the human race, for each of us today, life and death are critical points when we must respond to the constraints of the *zeitgeist*. The coronavirus pandemic is certainly one of those historical moments when our past, present and future seem to be colliding in the same zeitgeist. The time and space of the coronavirus is certainly an instant of 'proclamation', but also one of 'decision'. The non-human world of the coronavirus has proclaimed its supremacy over the human world and taken control of human destiny. But the human world has not yet pronounced its last word. Humanity is living its kairos, its propitious moment and its opportunity to take a decision. For many, the key decision to take is to stop the virus from spreading and to destroy it in the long term. This is imperative in order to save as many human lives as possible. But more importantly, the *kairic* moment of human destiny is to invite

humanity to introspect and to make a fundamental change in its approach to living and dying.

To live and to die is simple. But to know how to live and how to die is not. With the coronavirus pandemic, humanity is confronted by a death without a grave. What is most dreadful about dying from the coronavirus is that it is an insignificant death. Humanity is afraid of dying without knowing why the angel of death has suddenly arrived in 2020. In the Middle Ages, people considered the Black Death as a punishment from God. But in a post-theological world like ours, even those who believe in the story of the Apocalypse wear masks and go to the hospital to be tested for corona. Therefore, to believe or not to believe in the final divine judgement does not change the fact that this virus has endangered our basic human rights and civil liberties, and emptied the houses of God. Due to the global economic slowdown, it is as if human life has ceased on planet earth, emboldening the birds and animals to explore the locked-down cities where humans once walked and to breathe the air that humans once breathed. The fear of dying from an unknown enemy has completely changed our modes of being, both public and private. But everybody knows that the joys of walking through the streets of Rome, Paris, Delhi, London or New York, being able to listen to bird songs without encountering any vehicular traffic, is short-lived. For those of us who will survive the curse of the pandemic, going to work in the morning and socialising at night will once again become the rhythm of life.

The threat of the coronavirus should make us conscious of the existence of bigger threats that endanger human life. Among these, climate change is a deeper threat that will continue to be around the corner. It is time for humanity to understand that the consequences of its actions will be disastrous and catastrophic. What the coronavirus pandemic teaches us is that if humanity is to survive, this is the time for it to change its values, its priorities, and its perspective.

We cannot acknowledge the political and philosophical importance of the present crisis without underlining the vital need for a civic education and *paideia*—the Greek ideal of excellence and perfection. In ancient Greece, paideia referred to the rearing and education of an ideal member of the polis. In times of crisis, it is only through self-education that citizens can empower themselves to forge a global solidarity of compassionate responsibility and a solidarity against the repressive measures taken by the governments and big corporations to determine their modes of living and thinking. If today the choice for humanity is between freedom and servility, then the concepts of a 'global citizenship' and 'paideia' are closely related. The *paideic* effort is what makes the difference between ignorant prejudiced crowds and enlightened conscious citizens, and adds to the argument of civic virtue as practised by Athenians at the time of Pericles and Americans at the time of John Adams. It is only through their paideic efforts of civic education that ancient Athens and the first period of the American Revolution remain two successful examples of citizen rule. As Cornelius Castoriadis underlines,

> In antiquity, the proclaimed objective of human activity, engraved upon the frontispiece of the political edifice, undoubtedly was the ideal of the man who is *kalos kagathos*, along with virtue, paideia, or, as Pericles says ... *philokaloumen kaiphilosophoumen*, living in and through the love of beauty and of wisdom. Among the Moderns, ...[it] is ... the pursuit of ... universal happiness, which ... is but a sum of private happinesses. Behind the frontispieces, the actual objective of the Ancients ... was ... what they called *kleos* and *kudos*—glory, renown, esteem. Among the Moderns, it is ... wealth and power ... (Castoriadis 1993: 116–117)

What Castoriadis is pointing to is the idea of 'self-reflectiveness' of the citizens in ancient Athens—an urgent social and political need in today's world. What distinguished the Athenian citizens from us, virtually connected citizens with little say in the process of decision-making in our world beyond exercising franchise, was the direct relation of their civic freedoms with the social and political organisation of society. For Castoriadis, the history of self-reflectiveness of the citizens in Athens was a struggle against heteronomy. As he underlines, 'As the aim of self-government is not to accept any external limits, true self-government entails explicit self-institution, which presupposes, of course, the putting into question of the existing institution—and this, in principle, at any time ... In other words, democracy is the regime of (political) self-reflectiveness' (Castoriadis 1991: 20).

Thinking in the direction of what Castoriadis calls the 'self-reflectiveness' of citizens is an urgent necessity in our post-pandemic world. We need to re-evaluate some of the basic values on which the socio-economic and political contracts of our world stand; otherwise what we are currently suffering as a colossal human crisis will result in far worse catastrophes in the future. If humanity chooses to re-educate itself in the direction of autonomy and self-reflectiveness, it is assuredly not by copying the Athenians or the American Federalists, but by redefining the art of living together as an act of global exchange. The art of living together cannot be measured in terms of self-interests and personal ambitions (as it is in the corporate world), but in terms of virtue and excellence applied to a global citizenship.

Democracy is based, both in theory and in practice, on the idea of civic virtue and on the simple truth that citizens are capable of governing themselves. Civic virtue is the central matrix for self-reflectiveness and self-government. It is crucial to understand that the coronavirus pandemic

has been accompanied by the decline of civic values and the lack of citizen virtue in different segments of global society. Governments chose to isolate and confine their citizens for fear of not being able to control the pandemic. And when people turned to the virtual world of the internet to remain connected, governments also sought to contain the *parrhesiastic* potentialities of citizens by the systematic censoring and suppression of free speech in the name of 'medical populism'. State measures to contain the pandemic, taken in the name of public health and safety, were thus not only to identify and isolate infected individuals, but also a license to use mass surveillance tools against citizens—especially those who voiced any form of dissent—in the name of national security. As a result, those who survive the coronavirus crisis may also find themselves confronted with a long list of social, political, economic, cultural and psychological issues. Undoubtedly, in the absence of citizens' awareness and empowerment and dissident resistance, our world will be reduced to homogenously 'clean' and 'safe' digital spaces where virtual beings will gather and interact virtually, devoid of any human identity, ethics or responsibility. This is where civic education as a democracy-building tool must play an important role and is a vital requirement for establishing a common humanity and solidarity. In post-coronavirus societies, where human plurality and civil liberties are threatened, civic education or paideia is the only door open to an art of living together.

II

Modern politics has always been aware of its potential inner evil, and has therefore consistently tried to dissimulate it. Evil has the power to deceive everyone at all times, but especially

in times of crisis. Democracy was created to deepen the virtues of citizenship in practice and increase the people's participation in their governance. For those who have always believed in, and fought for, freedom and justice, democracy has been a way to the forging of a public realm of questioning and an uncompromising ethical commitment to the art of living responsibly together. Using and preserving this shared political public space in everyday life necessitates that individuals interact with each other in order to construct a common humanity. One of the requirements of engaging with others in this 'World House' is that one treats all others as beings capable of suffering, and apt for our empathy and compassion. Human beings around the world, regardless of their many differences, are capable of empathy and compassion for the sufferings of Others. This is made possible because of the framework provided by the fragile world of a common vulnerable humanity. To be able to perpetuate such a shared universal experience of human fragility and suffering, a corresponding universal moral action is required. Compassion is intimately connected to the human ability to suffer and can only be considered legitimate when it is in relation with the suffering of an Other. It is the human ability for compassion, expressed and experienced both ethically and politically and by both individuals and groups, which enables the possibility of a common ethical world of meaning and exchange.

The art of living incorporates within itself the process of exchange as an ethical commitment to the rejection and repudiation of selfishness as a barrier to our common humanity. Even if it is true that in the middle of a catastrophe, the instinct of survival compels each of us to think of saving ourself and our loved ones first, it is also true that when confronted with a global danger, the concept of a common humanity accompanies our response. What we learn from the coronavirus pandemic is that the problems we face are systemic

and that a fundamental societal change is needed. The biggest challenges faced by humanity have always extended beyond any one nation's borders. The present pandemic has engendered a moral crisis as people seek a foundation for hope. This moral crisis and vacuum will only widen and deepen if humanity fails to mobilise itself in accordance with what the situation demands. This kairos moment of the present crisis necessitates a rethinking of the fundamental purpose and vocation of humanity. Humanity has no option but to respond to the violence of the pandemic and its even more violent consequences with a new moral, aesthetic and personal philosophy. It is in this response that the true nature of humanity will be revealed.

For French philosopher Simone Weil, 'rootedness in a common humanity' is a primary and fundamental human need, as is the need of individuals to participate in a community that keeps alive past traditions. 'To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul' (Weil 1952: 41), according to her, because of which Weil also considers 'uprooting' (or *déracinement*) to be a crime. The main causes of uprooting, as understood by Weil, are the dominance of money, the omnipotence of the state and the devaluation of education. Weil's concept of 'uprooting' could also be applied to the present predicament of humanity after the coronavirus pandemic. There are reasons why humanity is unable to redefine itself in the present contexts of life and death. From the historical vantage point of where we stand today, what we call the notion of a 'common humanity' is the philosophical descendant of a triple heritage. The first is the heritage of a spiritual tradition, either monotheistic or polytheistic; the second is Greek and Roman; and the last is modern Europe and the Enlightenment. All three heritages have today come under explicit questioning in the contemporary world. There are many reasons for this, but we will confine ourselves to alluding only to three of them here.

First, we can point to the challenge of relativism which, *grosso modo*, underlines that all doctrines, all ideas and all values may be equally valid in reference to time and place. Two centuries ago, when liberal republicanism was overthrowing the old regime in Europe and America, questions concerning the moral and civic foundations of democracy received a rich response. The response was elaborated in grounding treatises of political philosophy written by thinkers characterised as the bringers of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. Nothing characterises the spiritual climate of the West today so much as the pervasive disbelief in the powerful philosophical pillars of modernity. What is so troubling about the present situation in our world is the *philosophic thinness* of answers to questions concerning pluralism, justice and universal ethics.

Second is the challenge of economic globalisation, which has profoundly impacted the idea of the plurality and diversity of civilisations. There was a time when different civilisations could co-exist, while being different. Their co-existence was not always peaceful, but each civilisation was unique in that it had its specific set of values and ethics, which gave meaning to the lives of its members, and a specific idea of their own identity as well as that of members of other civilisations. Globalisation broke this mould and it is now progressively blurring the boundaries between civilisations. It is now the logic of globalisation and the world market which shapes and dictates the moral, cultural, aesthetic and political characteristics of civilisations, which are therefore moving rapidly towards homogenisation.

The third and last challenge is that of violence and more specifically fundamentalism, practised in all faiths including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. We have seen many examples of fundamentalist violence in the past twenty years among the Buddhists of Myanmar, the Indian Hindutva, the Christian Zionists of the United States, the orthodox Jews

of Israel, and the Muslim fundamentalists of the Islamic State, Taliban and the Hezbollah.

Thus, coming to the end of a long journey, from modern Enlightenment to post-modern disenchantment, we see that all human societies, and especially those of the twenty-first century, have been facing these challenges. But the main question here and now is to see if globalisation is also the synonym of a globalisation of violence, and, if that is the case, is there any possibility of forging a nonviolent universalism to counter this market-sanctioned culture of violence?

III

Today the 'philosophical' question about the art of living and the art of dying is no longer an exercise in abstract thought or metaphysics; it has become an everyday issue of real life for all of us. Like the pandemics in history, the coronavirus crisis has once again confronted humanity with so many questions on multiple aspects of our contemporary world and life. Yet, the whole problem is to understand if this new human crisis contains the seeds of a different form of consciousness, accompanied by a strategy for change. But, what exactly do we mean when we consider the current pandemic as a 'crisis' in contemporary society? Frankly, it is not difficult to see that the crisis of contemporary society is in large part due to an excessive emphasis on the materialist, utilitarian values of life, and the resultant suppression and sidelining of ethical, aesthetic and spiritual values. Another related dimension of the contemporary crisis is the increasing conformism and complacency that we find in today's world. We can add to this a steep rise in the rights-consciousness of citizens, along with a steeper decline in their duty-consciousness. Consequently,

while insisting on individual rights as an essential requirement of social justice and democratic governance in our societies, we also need to talk about the duties and responsibilities of individuals and groups, towards each other and towards the collective whole. Therefore, we can say that lack of social consciousness and social cohesiveness are major features of the contemporary crisis.

Citizens in modern societies have a general tendency to see democracy more as a means of asserting their rights and demands, and less as a social institution where they could, and should, temper their freedoms with responsibility. In reality, the common citizen, who in theory is the sovereign in a democracy, is forced to remain a helpless, mute spectator to market mechanisms serving the dominant rationality of capitalist ideology. Over the past seventy-five years, since the end of World War II, a particularly noxious techo-economic paradigm has unfolded like a shock wave across the globe that has led to devastating effects upon our lifestyle and upon the planetary eco-system. This has propelled a predatory attitude towards Nature, which made room not only for ecological disasters but also for the destruction of human relationships with the natural world. To put it simply, the problem is not with modern science as a form of knowledge, but with the ideology of techno-science, an ideology that asserts that the aim of scientific truth is the unlimited expansion of a 'rational' mastery over Nature and Man. And this is not just the case in Western capitalism, but equally true of the developing countries where the same technology and knowledge systems are put in the service of this rational mastery. The domination of the ideology of techno-science goes hand in hand with the unlimited and unmediated expansion of wealth and capital, and its monopolisation by capitalist business enterprises, which dictate how this mastery and this expansion should be attained.

When Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher, affirmed that we need to attain knowledge and science in order to 'make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes 1968: 78), he was actually formulating the basic framework of the modern techno-capitalist system that dominates our societies today. What capitalism has succeeded in doing, especially at the global level, is to make populations around the world believe that capitalism is not only a substitute for the sacred authority of religion, but that it is also the highest form of knowledge in our societies. What is at stake here is the basic social organisation of our societies, within which the process of the social formation of individuals takes place and which corresponds to the created needs of these individuals. The social creation of these economic and cultural needs also creates and suggests values that fill people's lives and orients them within their ever-growing culture of mass production and mass consumption of consumer goods. However, this perpetual effort to earn more money and consume more has not, contrary to expectations, created the sense of greater happiness or contentment among people.

The perceived value of earning more and consuming more than one's neighbour or colleague or friend, in order to own the latest or most expensive product, is in fact ultimately neither self-gratifying nor self-satisfactory. The reason for this is that the individual is caught in a web of perpetual discontent and self-negation. Within the framework of techno-capitalism, the destruction of the meaning of producing a thing is accompanied by the ever-growing intervention of managerial bureaucracy and capitalist corporations in the means and ends of production. Work is reduced to nothing more than selling/providing a product/service, and a worker is no more than the producer of a product/service which possesses no significance or value over and above the demand for it and its

market value. This overwhelmingly market-driven utilitarian reduction and destruction of the meaning and value of things and people and relationships thereof profoundly impacts the participation of both individuals and groups in the organisation of our society, and in life itself. There is an increasing apathy and lack of interest in the social fabric of society, which shows itself in the absence of communitarian life as a positive and proactive form of socialisation. An immediate consequence of this is the complete breakdown of ethical standards, especially the sense of humanity and civility that prevailed in different societies till the end of World War II. In other words, there is a permanent withdrawal of individuals into their private spheres and the absence of social motives in the public space. As a result, our contemporary world finds itself devoid of the central philosophical question: what are we living together for?

This brings us to the problem of the self-representation of contemporary society, and its incapacity to ask the crucial question: what could be a possible art of living and dying? What the Covid-19 crisis shows us is that living and dying can both become meaningless. Living a crisis means going through an examination of conscience. Living a crisis is to experience the possibility of a rupture. It is in the spirit of this rupture that the art of living finds its meaning and relevance. The art of living is in the multiple ways in which our social nature can be expressed in its entirety. No matter how much we individually accumulate in terms of power, money or fame, we need more than these to give meaning to our lives. There is an ethical horizon of responsibility without which a shared life has no meaning. And this horizon of responsibility is grounded in our everyday social and political experience. But, crucially, the art of living is also to be able to retain a certain childlike wonder and questioning mode, about everything that surrounds us in the world.

IV

The art of living shows us that it is absurd to set limits to human creativity and pretend that we might exhaust ourselves in living. Despite periods of death, decay and inertia, life always surrounds us as a vital spark, which at any moment of history could have a renaissance. But the meaning of life is not what the advertisements, the global market, the government, the internet, or what society imposes on us. There is no transcendent source for an art of living. Life derives meaning and value from its own creative forces, in the here and now, in what surrounds us; that is why it is an art. Human life is lived creatively, or else it is not worth living. The challenge is: how to make life as meaningful as possible between its creative and destructive forces. This is where and when the art of living becomes a *paideia*, a creative action of giving meaning and signification to human life. The art of living is the *poietic* creation of humankind. Life as suffering is not poietic per se. If by *poiesis* we understand 'the bringing forth of an entity', as the ancient Greeks understood it, then the art of living is the bringing forth of life. It is a pledge to live and die in and for the essence of life. The aim here is not to master the inevitable, when life joins death, but to take the measure of life in the constant presence of death. It is an act of rendering death meaningful, as the manifestation of a fate that we share with other human beings.

For those who died as victims of the coronavirus, life turned out to be nothing but undignified suffering. Others standing afar—as distant spectators of their misery—looked at them as they sank to the bottom of life. The necessary social distancing has become the soul of darkness. Many died with no name and no grave, as if they had never lived and never walked upon this earth. And now, those who have survived

need to fight in order to bring life and light back to earth again. To acknowledge evil is not to escape from it, but to defeat it. But even if the pandemic is defeated, the question which remains is: how do we learn from our historical encounters with evil if we do not stop demonising death? It cannot be a mere hazard that this demonisation coincides with mortal man's dream of living forever.

As modern man has tried to realise this eternal dream of immortality through modern science, death itself has separated from life. We can go back and read the monumental prose of George Steiner on this, who noted that:

> An estimated seventy million women, men, children perished in war, deportation, famine, ideological and racial massacres between August 1914 and May 1945. ... One can state such a proposition and discuss its arithmetic. But one cannot ... attach meaning, let alone concrete imaginings to it. ... The threshold of the human in man has been lowered. The promise of compensation in another world ... or retribution is, after Auschwitz and the Gulag, after Dresden and Hiroshima ... morally nauseating. Above all else, *death itself has been devalued*. Stalin's dictum is definitive: 'the death of one man may be a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic.' (Steiner 2012: 59)

Those who died of coronavirus joined Stalin's statistic. The Covid-19 catastrophe showed us again that death has died in late modern times. Whether we can recapture its dignity again is uncertain. And, we will continue living and dying with this uncertainty. Unless, that is, we learn from this pandemic the difficult lesson of striving for an art of living and dying, but without thinking of it as an 'ideal mode of being'. As Aristotle said, life would be ideal if a person is able to live it in an ideal way. But living an ideal life is not living a perfect life. Perhaps because humanity, imperfect as it is, cannot live a perfect life.

The art of living after coronavirus is not a utopian dream. On the contrary, it is life within life, where exemplarity is maintained through an individual commitment to excellence as a noble state of mind. The self-sufficient, morally autonomous character of the Stoic sage stands in marked contrast to the self-centred and individualistic personality of a typical neoliberal corporate-minded bureaucrat. This description is, of course, a caricature taken to extremes. Nevertheless, it is true that in today's world, where individuals can lie compulsively and feel no guilt, or be completely insensitive to each other and to their surroundings, or flatter themselves that they have no culture and that there *is* no culture, living without excellence has certainly become a habit. Living in a market-ruled economy glorified by capitalism has brought out the worst in us. Sadly, we realise it only when confronted by global tragedies like the Covid-19 pandemic, and are unable to find any answers to our frightful predicament. Even God has abandoned the ship. The image of the Pope praying to an empty Saint Peter's Square is a reminder of the disenchanted and lonely world in which we live.

The search for excellence by means of self-cultivation and compassionate solidarity with the otherness of the Other are both one human action. If we make the lived experience of the Stoic sage and his stance as a moral agent our own art of living in the twenty-first century, we might have a chance to survive the next cataclysmic disaster that will strike humanity. This is our only kairos, our unique window of opportunity to save humanity from itself. There is not enough empathy and compassion in the world to permit any of it to be wasted on our utilitarian dreams. Humanity is far too preoccupied with its successes to be either concerned or capable of thinking about its future. The coronavirus tragedy has trampled upon the corpses of human beings as well as those of entire cultures. Where is the world heading? Will what comes tomorrow

justify the suffering of those who were taken away by the pandemic? No one can answer this. However, we all know that we are living through the death of a culture which offered us the path to power, prosperity and abundance. Because our choice is no longer between good and evil, but between the art of living and a life of meaninglessness and fear. Never before has humankind had so many reasons *not* to live a life of mindless, ignominous suffering and mediocrity. The courage to live the art of living is our passport to the future.

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The coronavirus pandemic is one of those historical moments when our past, present and future seem to collide. Humanity is confronted by an ignominious death—death reduced to a statistic. The fear of dying from an invisible, unknown enemy has changed our modes of thinking, living and being, both public and private, even as lockdowns and State surveillance measures—ostensibly distancing 'healthy' society from the impure, 'unhealthy' Other—have violated fundamental human rights and liberties.

Humankind is living its *kairos*, its propitious moment and opportunity to take a decision—one which will impact each one of us. The pandemic has engendered a moral crisis and vacuum. Humanity has no option but to respond to the more violent consequences of the pandemic with a new moral, aesthetic and personal philosophy. To survive this, and future pandemics, we must urgently re-evaluate the basic human values on which our world stands. We must redefine freedom, the value of life and death.

It is the universal human capacity for empathy, hope and compassionate justice that enable the possibility of a common ethical world of meaning and human solidarity. And it is here that a potential future for humanity lies, suggests world-renowned philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo in *The Courage to Exist*. Only a morality of common humanity—valid for *all* human beings at all times—can redefine the art of living in the face of a death that we all fear.

Ramin Jahanbegloo, one of the world's leading political philosophers and most widely-read authors, is Professor and Vice-Dean, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonepat, India. He won the Peace Prize (2009) from the United Nations Association in Spain for his work in promoting dialogue between cultures and his advocacy for non-violence.

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