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Opinion - The Limits of Humanist Ethics in the Anthropocene

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JAN POSPISIL, MAR 24 2020

The preventive measures taken around the world to mitigate the Covid-19 crisis have triggered a stimulating debate on its ethical implications. In this debate, terms like left, right, conservative or liberal appear to have lost their meaning when assessing the character of the current global lockdown. The argument put forward here is that the current crisis shows that Anthropocene ethics, first, evolve in a contestation between the two ethical logics – or ontopolitics – of withdrawal and affirmation and, second, that both of these logics develop in antagonisms that they cannot overcome.

The views on offer are segregated and largely polarised and incommensurable. The current majority sees the fight against the virus and the disease it triggers as indispensable and necessary. In social practices like physical distancing and stay-at-home, it invokes individual and collective heroism and global solidarity. In its political orientation, states are asked to decide on and implement radical measures to prevent a further spread of the disease. Others, in contrast, are concerned about the totalitarian character of especially the state-led approaches. Giorgio Agamben, for instance, sees his theory on the state of exception confirmed and interprets Italy's Covid-policy as a process of classic securitisation. Many other voices place themselves in between these two extremes, aiming to mitigate and rationalise, thus making the policy response possibly more effective.

This debate neglects the great ethical transformation that the current crisis generates. Solely focusing on the potentialities of their totems, the virus or state power, the arguments remain deeply embedded in a modern ontology: it is about the restoration of normality, overcoming the virus, and keeping the god-like promise of secure societies on which modernity is founded.

Such a view is misleading. What we experience is neither an expression of solidary global governance nor of totalitarian biopolitics willing to suppress populations in the name of neoliberalism. Instead, we are witnessing is the first concrete manifestation of Anthropocene ethics at a large scale. What the climate change debate has attempted to trigger, for instance, through their calls for a state of emergency related to carbon politics, the Covid crisis is now implementing, developing, rationalising.

Withdrawal appears to be the order of the day. Physical distancing separates humans from one another, state-imposed curfews, in collaboration with the stay-at-home movement, separate humans from the world. In modern reasoning, these acts can be read as heroism, as individual sacrifices for the collective good of health and, in the last instance, survival. Withdrawal thus wins an ethical quality, which leads Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos to call Covid an 'ethical disease'. Indeed, the ethics of withdrawal believe in the solvability of the situation. It declares a total responsabilisation which, by invoking the figure of the 'vulnerable', requires all subject interests to step back behind of what is proposed as indisputable common sense.

The ethical logic of withdrawal has an extended history in the ecology movement. As Delf Rothe has shown, this radical reasoning is foundational to the 'eco-catastrophism' strand of the climate movement. In withdrawal, there is hope, the hope of victory against the disease, against nature. There is hope to return to normality, to reunite.

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However, this logic has to fail. Societies withdrawal from the world unavoidably translates into society's separation from itself. The present enthusiasm for global solidarity in withdrawal will be short-lived. In turn, border closures, isolationism and Blockwart-mentality are on the rise. Society in withdrawal means the end of society. In spite of suggestions such as Donna Haraway's 'kin-making', society's separation from the world eventually means the end of the world. What is presented as the ethics of withdrawal appears as a last attempt to rescue modernity under the conditions of the Anthropocene.

In contrast to withdrawal, affirmation reaches beyond hope. It accepts the fragility and precarity inherent to life. Affirmation is pragmatic. It acknowledges the exposure to the 'great outdoors', the predominance of nature, the human embeddedness in the world. Affirmation is thus closely tied to resilience, to the idea that people and societies can cope with and adapt to adverse circumstances. In practical terms, elements of affirmative logic in relation to Covid were to be found in 'controlled spread' approaches that would have accepted the infection of a significant part of the population – and, therefore, a significant number of deaths – in order to keep societies running as normal as possible.

As withdrawal, affirmation faces an ethical antagonism. The approach of safeguarding society as a whole by committing to sacrifice parts of it has not only led to severe humanist resistance. Such an approach also remains unthinkable in modern reasoning. A late-modern human society genuinely struggles to accept its self-sacrifice to the world, because, in contrast to a real war, the sphere of heroism, such sacrifice is essentially non-heroic and wasted. Death remains lonesome, useless, unremarkable. Despite all calls for resilience, for coping with disaster and crisis, for accepting risk as the necessary precondition of essentially fragile life, the human appears incapable of achieving what Slavoj Žižek demands with regards to the Covid-crisis: to accept existential uncertainty and to deal with it.

Both withdrawal and affirmation, thus, emerge as both necessary and impossible. They aim at constructing humanist ethics in the Anthropocene. However, the Anthropocene relentlessly enforces the post-human condition: neither can human society withdraw from the world, nor can it remain within the world. It can only affirm its own finality. The times of life as a promise appear to have ended.

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