

## The Gift of Covid-19

Samir Gandesha



Tim Morozzo Photography 2016. Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.

The German word for poison is *das Gift*. Switching between the German and the English denotations brings to mind the close association between the two meanings that also suggests the Greek word “*didonai*” (to give) and “*dosis*” (gift), the root of the English “dose,” signifying something that is given. The Covid-19 virus can be regarded as a dose of poison (*das Gift*); a kind of an offering or gift.

The pandemic brings into view the relation between trauma, which undoubtedly has been induced around the world, to individual and public physical and mental health, social relations, forms of governance and the “economy,” on the one hand, and the nature of thinking, on the other. In his project of engaging in a *Destruktion* (deconstruction) of the history of Western metaphysics in *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger proposes to bring thinking back to those primordial Greek experiences of Being that were, in his view, immediately blocked and covered over by metaphysics’ forgetfulness of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) in its positing of the opposition between Being and time. Heidegger can be taken as referring here to Plato’s claim in *Theatetus* (155 d) that philosophy begins in *thaumazein* (θαυμάζειν) or “wonder” at Being in its temporal play of *Aletheia* or simultaneous concealment and disclosure.

The gift of *das Gift* is that it gives us another way of thinking about the origins of philosophy. Perhaps philosophy doesn’t begin in the wonder or the “question of Being” (*Seinsfrage*), of “why there is something rather than nothing,” at all. What if all philosophizing, instead, begins in *trauma*, understood in a tear in the fabric of the symbolic order or the web of meaning that comprises a world (*Lebenswelt*)? Hasn’t Covid-19 shattered our worlds? Trauma, in other words, is as Hal Foster frames it, “the return of the real.” For Plato, the *traumatic* as opposed to *wondrous* origin of his philosophy was the trial and execution by the (democratic) polis of philosophy itself as personified, of course, by Socrates. Plato’s political philosophy is therefore a philosophy *against* politics, resulting in a perhaps over-compensatory attempt to make the world safe for philosophy; it is a philosophy against politics masquerading as a political philosophy. Arguably, the quintessential moment of trauma presaging philosophy was, in fact, a pestilence not unlike the one we are currently living through. This mythical, Theban plague augurates that quintessential tragedy and provokes the thinking of a figure who has

been called the “first philosopher.” Oedipus’ drive to knowledge ends the city’s suffering but begins his own and, of course, belies his (constitutive) lack of self-knowledge.

The young Hegel understood the traumatic origin of philosophy in his early attempt to grapple with the post-Kantian landscape of German philosophy, specifically with the systems of Fichte and Schelling. Philosophy comes on the scene, he argues in the so-called *Differenzschrift*, as a way of healing the diremptions (*Zerissenheit*) that characterized a world torn asunder in the aftermath of the tumultuous and profoundly dislocating French Revolution—a revolution that Edmund Burke understood as fundamentally Oedipal. While Hegel will later turn such thinking into a theodicy or the “negation of the negativity” of evil in a divinely created world (yet another form of over-compensation), Theodor W. Adorno unearths the traumatic kernel of Hegel’s philosophizing brought to a head in Marx’s *Das Kapital* as what Adorno calls in *Negative Dialektik* the “phenomenology of the anti-Spirit.” Universal history is, therefore, not the progressive realization of a genuinely human, ethical form of life (*Sittlichkeit*), but just its opposite. Hegel’s theodicy entails a logic whose telos is not the plenitude of Spirit but its abjection as signified the post-apocalyptic bunker inhabited, in a proleptic form of social isolationism, by Clov, Hamm and his elderly parents who are, themselves, confined to garbage cans, in Beckett’s *Endgame*. Everyone across the globe, now, is wondering whether Covid-19 is not, in fact, the endgame of universal history in the guise of neo-liberal globalization.

Covid-19 therefore undoubtedly constitutes a crisis and the word “crisis,” it is important to remember, derives from the Greek *krisis* (decision) and *krinein* (to decide). In late Middle English, the word comes to mean the turning point of a disease, that *decisive* point at which the condition of the patient manifestly *improves* or *deteriorates*. Today, perhaps reverting unconsciously to this particular sense of the word when we obsessively swipe up on our smart phones for reports of current status of the spread: Is the curve on the upswing or downswing? In the phrase unknown just two weeks ago but now ubiquitous and inescapable: Are we, by isolating ourselves from one another like Hamm’s unhappy family, “flattening the curve”?

The crisis also has to do with the nature of our neoliberal capitalist social relations. Can we ever go back to the previous normal, the *status quo ante*? But was that normal ever really *normal*? “Ah, the good old days,” sighs Hamm’s mother. This was, we must remember, a post-human world in which human beings were quickly becoming posthumous, which is to say: increasingly obsolete. Isn’t the logic of the virus, at some level, simply an extension and deepening of the logic of that world rather than a qualitative break from it? What, *now*, must change? Key to understanding this crisis as a *crisis*, which is to say, as a moment of decision (though, one would hope, without *decisionism*), is the extent to which our own traumatic present reveals what Adorno called the “primacy of the object” (*Vorrang des Objekts*) or, as alluded to above, in a Lacanian register, the anxiety-provoking Real.

That the integrity of my finite, abject, possibly infected, though asymptomatic, vulnerable body is inextricable from the integrity of those of others around me both in my immediate vicinity no less than on continents far away. Viral pandemics such as Covid-19, and the climate change from which they are inextricable, know no borders. The well-being and indeed thriving of my body is contingent upon that of non-human animal species and the eco-systems they inhabit and constitute. In contrast to the amazement at the existence of why there is something rather than nothing, the gift of *das Gift* can be regarded, then, a kind of brutal lesson in universalism. It discloses what could be called a *negative* humanism grounded not in an ontology or essence of the human, the mystical “sendings of Being,” ego autonomy or will to power but in

the *inescapable* universalism of a trembling fragility and profound vulnerability to suffering, and, ultimately to that final endgame: Death itself.