

Learning-avoidance, or what does it mean to be human now?

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I.

While in quarantine and re-reading some of my old heroes, Peter Sloterdijk and Bruno Latour re-emerge as more than academic curiosities to me. Sloterdijk and Latour are better known in sociology and allied social science disciplines.

With regard to Sloterdijk, reading him again brings back memories of my college years as a student of philosophy, hours spent reading Kafka, Nietzsche, Hess, Mann, Novalis, Freud and Marx, and other literary and philosophical giants at the former Goethe Institut before it transferred its operation to one of the busiest commercial districts in the capital.

But also a bit sad at the same time. In college I've read with enthusiasm his phenomenal book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, his first bestselling work, but since then have never quite understood his subsequent political views. His political views on the welfare state and later incursions into feminist discourse were somewhat off-kilter to me. But I'm not writing this to argue with that.

I'm looking for, call it an event, or space of surprise attendant to his later concept of 'co-immunism' in relation to our experience as an 'organic species', which at present, to use a phenomenological term, is 'bracketed' by quarantine. This concept, as he describes, refers to 'overcoming' the gap between biological, or natural, and cultural phenomena by our common socio-immunological and psycho-symbolic practices 'with varying success' as a species, apropos our human ancestors, 'in the form of imaginary anticipations and mental armour'.

In *You Must Change the World: On Anthropotechnics*, Sloterdijk refers to our immunological constitutions which, in general, reflect "life itself as a dynamics of integration." This integration through time becomes "equipped with auto-therapeutic and 'endo-clinical' competencies" in what he calls "species-specific space of surprise." Sloterdijk elaborates at length this particular concept of 'organic' space:

It has an equally innate and - in higher organisms - adaptively acquired responsibility for the injuries and invasions it regularly encounters in its permanently allocated environment or conquered surroundings....[T]hanks to the efficiency of these devices, which are constantly at the ready, the organism actively confronts the potential bringers of its death, opposing them with its endogenous capacity to overcome the lethal.

But this dynamics may be disturbed by what Sloterdijk also refers to as the capacity of modern humans "to be [historically] dazzled that gives credit to unlimited illusions of the new". The culprit, as it were, is that 'modernity' itself paradoxically 'posits meaning' in the 'new' per se.' As Sloterdijk argues, this 'causes the brightening of the global learning climate'. But it also comes at a certain cost, what he describes as the mortal 'blade of distinction' between the old and the new that "demands cruelty to oneself and others [and therefore] leads to overload in its most naked state." The naked state refers collectively to our organic bodies. Here Sloterdijk utilized the metaphor of the body of Christ, the Christ on the Cross as the price of his personal crusade against the old faith.

This blade of distinction, for example, could be glimpsed earlier in Hegel except that its resolution tends to be speculative. Here the distinction is wedged between material history and speculative thought. With the blade of distinction, the historical promise of the Christ on the Cross was no longer pursued. History can show that 'positive' resurrection is humanly impossible, thus, history is left with the mere 'negative' idea of the forsakenness of the world.

Paradoxically, this 'idea' is the only 'material' that's left that contains a promise – the resurrection of the world through the labor of ideation, knowledge or science, or generally, what Hegel calls the Spirit, the labor of the negative. In his famous quotation in *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel says that 'the Spirit must wrest the idea of the speculative Good Friday from the historic Good Friday' (its supraterritorial promise is only good for 'cloud-specialists', as Schelling, Hegel's erstwhile friend, would also echo), further suggesting that the idea must negate the non-reflective contingent character of history for human redemption to become concretely possible.

If the 'flesh can be resurrected in this life only and not in the otherworldly', it behooves science and knowledge to invest in bodies, which transforms the Spirit into a kind of biopower. Here the blade of distinction transforms deeply internally into what Sloterdijk calls 'somaticism', in a sense a way to carve up the socius or social body according to either the clinical difference between health and sickness, the biological (male and female), the psychological (sane and mad), the juridical (citizen and the outcast, such as the criminal offender), and other social and cultural fields of contested differences, the whole system of binary opposites that Nietzsche earlier lamented enabled the pure utilitarian calculus of the moral values of good and evil, which, according to him, could be traced back to Christianity. Thus, Foucault's analysis of the complementary origins of modern society in the birth of the clinic, which coincides with the birth of the prison system, is right on point. These two systems manifest and demonstrate powerful binarisms that can provide semiotic models for organizing the social that is not altogether independent of desire, labor, production, and language. A body is social insofar as it expresses a language, and occupies or grounds a place in labor, production, consumption and sexuation. Thus the social body is not an undifferentiated body. Bodies act and speak differently. The tendency of binarism is to reduce these differences to permanent ontological positions, such as the difference between the sexes, the relation of labor and wealth, etc.

Now, almost all countries in the world today are under a relative 'state of exception' that offers to resolve the crisis that Covid-19 has brought upon us with a familiar blade of distinction, the rich and the working poor. This is how the pandemic states give credit to the unlimited illusion of the new: a new, yet in the form that it is merely recycled, way to carve up the population being imposed upon a biopolitical demand, i.e., to preserve its immunity and willingly endure the almost inhuman process of keeping the body secured from the epidemic until a cure is found to be able to move beyond the limit-threshold of the lethal, which means we are looking into the inevitability of the virus seeking for millions of hosts to mass infect and probably send to untimely deaths, for a new state of humanity to be born. A cure to the pandemic essentially means creating a new type of humanity. (Just to add substance to what seems still surreal, in the Philippines, out of a population of 100 million, more than 20 million live below the poverty line, most of them reside in slums surrounding the greater Manila metropolis, outranking in density even Delhi, Tokyo and Paris, which is now the center of the epidemic. But more than the grim prospect of mass infection and starvation apocalypse, there is a collective denial of majority of its poor population that any more lethal experience they will be forced to bear, as the outbreak prolongs the lockdown of major cities of the capital, will be caused by another poverty. They have witnessed this poverty many times over. They know not only its seasonal appearance (during election times) but have also participated in it. This is the moral poverty of those who govern them through a blade of distinction that favors the wealthy at the expense of the working poor that have also, unfortunately, partly contributed to a discriminatory system of economic distribution by continuing to elect the elite's political representatives in office. Besides, most are bound

to a common fatalistic view of reality that dates back to centuries of Christian indoctrination since the Spanish Crown colonized the islands).

All over the world, humanity, especially the working poor, is slowly being subjected to a kind of biopower that applies a blade of distinction upon bodies that are either defenseless and/or vulnerable or possess better immunological capacities. The underlying logic is that there has to be a population of bodies capable of surviving into the post-pandemic world, a world of bodies again, but under a 'presumptive' new state of production and consumption, and of a new practice of sexuation (altogether 'dazzled by the new', as Sloterdijk would argue). By then we can deem to have 'understood the past', but it must 'not' be 'rejuvenated' (what the logic of sublation in Hegel, for instance, teaches us).

Which leads me back to Sloterdijk. The unlimited illusion of the new has, inopportunately, already taken the species-body into an unprecedented 'learning-avoidance' curve. The kind of global response, so far, to a new strain of flu virus wreaking havoc on human populations at present all the more rationalizes this dismal type of 'learning-avoidance' that threatens to destroy, not only present populations, but also what the human species have learned and gained, over thousands of years' practice of 'auto-therapy' and over long periods of gaining 'endo-clinical competencies' that may provide us a model for defeating the pandemic.

Even so this evolutionary practice of 'overcoming the lethal' includes approaches that would also complicate our appreciation of past models, approaches that are also fatal and destructive (such as ritual sacrifices to end a prehistoric plague, which resonate in present medical recommendations for drastic 'herd immunity') given the contingencies of prehistoric survival. Our modern sensibility and state of technological progress should be sufficient enough to pass up 'learning-avoidance operations' that the prehistoric may, however, also be guilty of, *give and take* examples of needless expenditure of libidinal energies (present in ritual sacrifices) and of competencies that could offer models for optimum survival with minimal human cost. Thus, our modern sensibilities, to employ Bruno Latour's idiom this time (who I started to read only few years ago), must have developed unique capabilities to apprehend what he calls a 'metamorphic zone'.

This 'zone', for instance, is where nature and society interact not as separate domains but rather as a knowledge-churning space (if I may put it that way) that allows us to 'detect actants before they become actors'. It would have allowed us to detect, for example, the dangerous tendency of a disturbing alliance between actants, such as the man-wildlife gastro-intensive alliance, the presumed bat-pangolin-human-to-human vital transmission origin of Covid-19, before it became a global threat to the continuity of the species. But this zone, this antidote to non-learning, seems now lost, that is, in a neoliberal world. Latour explains the paradox of this metamorphic zone even as he pays attention to the species-wide cost of this abysmal loss:

What also accounts for our utter impotence when confronted with the ecological threat: either we agitate ourselves as traditional political agents longing for freedom – but such liberty has no connection with a world of matter – or we decide to submit to the realm of material necessity – but such a material world has nothing in it that looks even vaguely like the freedom or autonomy of olden times. Either the margins of actions have no consequence in the material world, or there is no more freedom left in the material world for engaging in it in any politically recognizable fashion" (Latour, 'Agency at the time of the Anthropocene').

In the face of the pandemic, one may ask, have we glorified enough what Sloterdijk calls our modern 'training in learning-avoidance operations' that we have come to this point? More than anything, this behooves a profound question of existence, *'what does it mean to be human now?'*

It is in this context that I would like to conclude this reflection with a short retrospect of my pet subjects in college - phenomenology and existentialism, which I can now, in my more mature age, gracefully interrogate, without necessarily ignoring the impressive literature that still ranks among the most edifying models of intellectual and ethical independence.

II.

Thing is phenomenology and existentialism have a general tendency to interpret our long evolutionary past as an ontological issue (this is a fair description of the discipline that has been bestowed upon generations of students of philosophy), rather than as a broadly historical and social one (upon which we can, of course, philosophically reflect), and thus, implicates our modern errors as failures to address that question.

What I mean by the 'ontological' here is that in which the question of existence, or being for that matter, necessarily culminates in a human-centered world. I must admit this is a very liberal interpretation of the meaning of the 'ontological'.

I'm not saying all phenomenological disciplines and existentialist interpretations would fit this description. In recent years, they have been employed as supplementary lenses or subsidiary frameworks to interpret our more complex experience in contemporary times. I couldn't imagine the modern readers and scholars of Jakob von Uexküll's theory of (animal) environment, for instance, without them having a fair knowledge of phenomenology (*cf.* Buchanan), or a solid footing in its discipline, insofar as his theory broadly suggests an epochal suspension of the reflective standpoint of philosophy, in regard to the subject that interprets (also the subject that 'consumes'), the central agency that extends its view of the world to non-subjects (animals included). Uexküll takes us to a phenomenological examination of animal environments, which, incidentally, resonates in the way we have so far known of wildlife environment being disturbed, through domestication and gastronomic practices of a select section of the economic and political elite, for instance, in China, igniting a global outbreak). The relevance of phenomenology is clear. It requires us to suspend judgments and prejudices that attend to the naturalistic attitude (by all indications, a monohumanistic gaze), especially in studying and intervening in non-human phenomena. Nonetheless, as it went with Husserl (and also, with other interpretive claims of the existentialist tradition that found its way in modern Christian ethics), phenomenology and existentialism in ways that they have been re-oriented to particular semiotic interventions ended up embracing a concept of the transcendental, that of the ego or subjectivity (most especially in phenomenological discourse). This transcendentalism yields a sorry deduction that systems like theology and political credos as well, for instance, could exploit and dredge up to resurrect and/or defend the idea of transcendent entity which tends to justify a kind of sovereign immunity to scrutiny and criticism, both in its theological and secular guise.

Incidentally, Heidegger's later engagement (after WWII) with existentialism had taken to task this anomalous transition from transcendental ego to the concept of being, the leap from the famous Cartesian/Kantian ego-subject to the metaphysical notion of God (which attributes being or existence to the latter, thus, the ontological leap). It may be difficult to follow Heidegger here (especially with regard to his even more complicated engagement with secular and Christian varieties of existentialist thought) but we can make it quite simple. Any hermeneutic transition or interpretive movement from subject to God has to be historically grounded. This refers to Heidegger's notion of 'historicity'. And historicity has a ground, which, according to Heidegger, is always the subject that inquires that he calls Dasein. The analytic of Dasein shows the positionality of the subject in any given history and

social space which in the end reveals the contingent and finite character of hermeneutic interpretation, the groundedness of an interpretive claim. Thus, God or Being in the sense of the ontological transition from the ego-subject is called back to the finitude of the inquiring one, the Dasein. This 'calling-back' in a sense puts to paid any claim to infinite or absolute God, or to totalistic conceptions of the metaphysics of Being in its secular forms today, such as History, State, Biopolitical control, the omnipresence of algorithms, etc. In this sense, a 'space for freedom' is secured.

Which leads me to my main point. All these, however, become more intelligible and graspable as historical and sociological interpretations which can make for concrete generalities as semiotic interventions into the actual world.

To employ the Fichtean lenses, or the philosophy of J.G. Fichte, once admired by his 18th century peers for his contribution to German Romanticism, these generalities, in a sense, 'awaken in us a feeling for our true needs ... and acquaint us with a means for satisfying these needs', i.e., in a more understandable sense. They can make for a 'maximal' and/or 'positive' philosophical grounding of interpretations, if I may add. It is in this sense that Latour's concept of 'metamorphic zone' and Sloterdijk's critical exposure of 'learning avoidance operation' in view of his concept of 'co-immunism' are powerful deterrent-metaphors, not only for their aesthetic fluency to read into reality a nuanced explanation and/or perspective, rather than a pre-conceived totality that functions as transcendent, but also for its maximal capability to exploit an indeterminate semiotic space (such as reading into the 'metamorphic zone' as a ground of explanation that does not, however, reveal itself by pure appearing). But once a ground is detected, the objective is not to sacrifice understanding to deterministic mediations of thought (in sheer hurry to localize an 'idea'), or to endless process of speculation (in a reckless form of imagining undivided wholes, so to speak, which only cater to 'cloud-specialists'). They, thus, prevent the innate urge of embodied thought (also present among the prehistoric) to wonder at transcendent causes to either climax in a super-*credo* or doctrine, or sink in the negative abyss of indetermination, no less an 'unreflected exterior' (as Hegel described in the *Science of Logic*) where thought wanders aimlessly and falls prey to its own unreasonable deductions with dismal societal consequences.

This is to say that a species-body enthralled by the unreflective, such as a false cause, in the sense Spinoza described of the teachings of the theocratic state of his time, not to mention their folk reverberations in superstitions and a form of mass subjectivity that is rivaled today by an almost absurd willingness to seek truth in 'fake news', is more than likely a species-body that's 'incapable of actual knowledge' (to quote Schelling's in one of his 'Berlin' lectures in the wake of Hegel's death), thus, all the more prone to the paradoxical dogmatism of the 'postmodern' world, if the term 'postmodern' still holds for much of what is happening in the world today, or false consciousness (in post-truth societies), as well as the spread of neo-reactionism and resurgent populism that have been the most banal signatures of 21st century *Spirit*.

To conclude, these are dangerous times, to say the least. The pandemic is already testing this *Spirit* in unimaginably lethal ways. To 'wander not aimlessly', and not just for its quarantine connotation now that humanity is in lockdown – this would most probably save us from, make us 'overcome' the lethal.

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