

The value of life

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The famous Spanish artist Salvador Dali wrote that nothing excited him as much as the spectacle of a third-class train-car full of dead workers crushed in an accident. He was not at all indifferent uncaring in the face of death since when a friend of his, Prince Mdinavi dies in an accident, he was deeply upset by it. It was simply that, for Dali, the only death for which to grieve was that of a prince, which has nothing in common with a load of workers' corpses.

This should not be taken as the whimsy of a person known for his eccentricity. Actually, the death of a human being does not constitute an event except in relationship to other human beings. The circumstances of a person's death and the interest that it rouses are valued only by those who survive him. The importance accorded to this even — in itself, absolutely common — does not, therefore depend on the event in itself, but on the idea of death that

the one who comments on it holds and the opinion one has of the one who died.

Now, we are all in the habit of making distinctions between those deaths called natural and those called violent. Without digressing on the comical aspects of these two epithets, let's examine only what they mean: there is a kind of death that is considered legitimate in some way, the "natural" death; and a kind that is considered artificial, the "violent" death. The "natural" death would be the work of chance, of destiny. When one dies, one dies. Whether we abandon this earth at the furthest term of our span due to old age, or this moment is anticipated because of an incurable illness, doesn't seem to make much difference. All this is made to return into the normal progression of things. "Violent" deaths, in their turn, are split into two types: those that occur by accident and those that are a conscious decision, whether of the one who dies (suicide) or of another person (murder). And it is this latter form, death by conscious decision, which provokes the greatest consternation and disturbs the human mind.

While substantially expressing a kind of hierarchy, dictated by morality, of the different ways of dying, the borders between these different qualifications of death fluctuate according to circumstances. For example, if deaths caused by accidents — "violent" deaths — are also sometimes surprising due to their high numbers, they hardly generate debate or arouse special horror. The concept of "white murder", widespread in the past to point to the daily accidents on the job that cause a continuous flow of deaths, no longer finds much space in a world increasingly convinced that its social organization is a completely natural fact. If capitalism is not one of many forms that so-

cial structures could assume and is sold as the sole and unique possibility available to us, then all the deaths it causes seem inevitable, the fruit of a perhaps malignant, but nonetheless unavoidable fate. Thus, the worker who loses her life under a press, or falling from a scaffolding, certainly dies a “violent” death, but it is still considered “natural”, not murder. In the same way, one who dies of cancer is generally considered a victim of an inevitable fate. One never knows who the misfortune may strike. But what can we say if this cancer was caused by a particularly harmful industry? Don’t many trials that regularly take place against multinationals for damages caused by their industrial activities show the responsibility of their directors in these tragic events? Can these deaths be counted among the “violent” ones or not?

As we see, as soon as we start to examine the problem deeply, all the distinctions between the various ways of dying begin to waver. And they collapse completely if we risk considering openly aware death outside of the commonplaces of a morality dictated by the State Reason, i.e., if we face the problem of whether it is permissible or not to willfully cause the death of another human being. It goes without saying that when this question is posed in completely abstract terms, it is unable to rouse anyone’s interest. At the most, it rouses indignation, and the response could only be a dry no. In the end, who could ever justify murder? Instead we all do it to each other* throughout the course of our existence. Some recent** events from the news will help us better understand this statement.

When the State kills

In the United States, the state death apparatus continues to operate unhindered. At the beginning of August in Texas, two prisoners condemned to capital punishment were executed in the course of a half hour, a small assembly line. One of those condemned was described as mentally disabled at the time of the events of which he was the protagonist, but this did not save his life. As is customary, numerous polemic preceded and followed these executions.

The question of the death penalty is sorted out in a few words: deciding whether the state has the right to kill. We already know, through the exception established as “legitimate defense”, that the state grants this right to the individual who is attacked. And by invoking the same exception, the state justifies the wars that it embarks upon, carried out when necessary by emergency regimes. Paradoxically, the reasoning that authorizes such enterprises, in reality nullifies the exception in the very moment that it claims to affirm it: military art teaches that attack is the best defense. In order that the declared war does not appear as a despicable abuse of power, the state must show that it is defending someone or something: when the American armed forces bomb Iraq or Serbia they claim to be defending a principle. This example shows how every offensive can be defined as a defense, since an offensive always defends a “higher” interest or principle. But the need to justify the defense in action, to prove that the other is the aggressor, the swindler, is only the purpose of case studies, the need to bring acts into agreement with the rules of the game that, in liberal democratic society, is in the hands of the mass media.

One could make the same argument about the condemned prisoners who end up on the electric chair. As *citizens*, they belong to the state. As condemned prisoners, they have failed in their duties toward the state. The state, which already arranges their life, can arrange their death as well. The guilty verdict is only a tribute to the rules of the game: answerable or extraneous to events, what's the difference?

For my part, I have chosen not to concede the responsibility for my life to the community called the state, but this responsibility has been taken from me without anyone ever asking me about anything, not even — or maybe, particularly not — if, by chance, I have a better idea about it. Thus, the state is the confiscation first of all of my life, then of the lives of others — it is the sum of these confiscations. This ensemble of confiscations produces the rules of the game that are called laws, to which I am subjected and from which I withdraw myself as much as possible. And I don't withdraw myself from this or that specific law when I have the opportunity or because I don't agree with its details, but from the whole ensemble and in principle. No law of the state is of any use to me, because all are based on the usurpation of my complicity.

If I enter into the debate on the death penalty, it is to point out the moralistic hypocrisy of both sides. The partisans of the death penalty participate in Rousseau's *Social Contract*: if the death penalty prevents one human being from killing others, one has a numerical benefit in "human lives." On the other hand, those who oppose the death penalty would have willingly endorsed, according to the same calculation, the assassination of Hitler (wasn't he a human being too?). Other supporters of the death penalty

consider it a deterrent, but it is still about the same mathematical calculation; but in this case, it cannot be verified.

Then there are those, even rarer, who favor the death penalty for the same reasons that Lacenaire, the famous 19th century outlaw, put forward, invoking it for himself: they find death preferable to life imprisonment. If I were facing life imprisonment — endless punishment — I might agree. But anyone who urges the execution of others should at least have the good taste not to blather on about “the sacred value of life.”

The opponents of the death penalty have no concrete arguments. They have only the moral precept drenched in the sacredness of what they call life, and mix this religious commandment with the hypocrisy of secular meekness. They are against the death penalty as long as no one rapes their daughter, tortures their dog or steals their wallet. They are against the death penalty, but then they praise the military and the forces of order. They are against the death penalty, but then they work for some part of the way industry. They are against the death penalty, but don't lift a finger in support of those who lack everything and risk dying of starvation.

In war, in every war (and so also in the one called daily life), killing and being killed are contingencies of the total logic. That the state can kill inadvertently, excessively or for its own Reasons is considered *just*, not only according to the rules that it proclaims, but according to the social war that is going on. It seems clear that the spread of the concept of “respect for life” serves to enforce a preventative measure on the part of the state to limit the number of losses suffered in this war. It tends to support prison over death (when a criminal risks death, she risks life; when

he risks prison, he risks being condemned to survival) and succeeds in denying the moral possibility of killing to mere individuals, unless it is a question of protecting It from the offensive of its enemies. Not that the state is against murder — against putting an end to human life. It simply wants the legal and moral monopoly over it. Consent to the state is also consent to the monopoly it holds over murder.

To kill or to preserve?

Last summer in Tuscany, a young man who had been struck by an incurable illness died with the help of a friend to whom he had turned. He didn't feel like ending it alone. The parents of the dead young man, aware of the desperation that had tormented him, immediately made it known that they felt no resentment against the friend who had killed their son. This event shows that authentic relationships between individuals can never be enclosed in any social norm and that every regulative guaranteed and protects only the freedom... of the state.

The prohibition of euthanasia is the most glaring evidence of the sanctification of life through its mere biological preservation. It is arbitrarily decided that between pain and death, pain is *a priori* preferable. When someone finds herself faced with the dilemma of whether to be disabled to the point where she can no longer achieve the goals he has set for himself or to put an end to her useless torment, she is urged from all sides to remember the prohibition against death: by the law, by superstition, by the arrogance of an all-powerful medical corps. There are individual who exist in an irreversible coma for years, preserved in this larval condition in the name of pre-

eminence of survival, even though they have definitively become incapable of having a life.

But despite the humanitarian ideology that opposes it, if euthanasia has its enemies, it also has its friends, whose numbers are growing. I think that euthanasia should be carried out not only at the explicit request of the one directly involved, but — in the case of one who is no longer conscious — at the decision of those closest to them as well, relatives or friends (at times more than families, so long as the latter have rights and legal interests that reinforce their tyranny over sick relatives). The possible errors and excesses that might occur would certainly not be more tragic or numerous than the heroic treatment that confuses life and survival to the exclusive benefit of the latter, and that is applied today with total violence by a medical executive who bases his power on perfunctory knowledge.

Euthanasia is an act of killing that is found on the boundary between murder and suicide, because the object of euthanasia could well be someone else. Recently, an Englishman killed himself after a newspaper published a photo with his name and address in a list of alleged child molesters. Facing scandal and the possible unpleasant consequences of such publicity, the man preferred to put an end to this trouble. I doubt that the followers of the humanitarian religion were moved by the loss of *this* human life, the value of which had clearly expired with his sexual preference.

Against suicide as well, the ruling ideal is the preservation of life degraded to survival. The different forms of suicide, from hanging to the use of drugs to the many forms of cheap nihilism, contain all the recognized impossibilities of life, whereas very few starving people kill them-

selves due to the impossibility of survival: rather, this is the main reason for the taboo on suicide. Because if the inability to fulfill one's life were discussed as a matter of priority in public, on the streets, it would threaten to overthrow those who manage other people's lives, avoiding to probe into remedies. As a suicide of the last century said: "And you chubby, rosy, academic, jesuitic priests of every stripe, of every poison, of every type, why would you remind me of this mission with so much care, if you had not exploited so shamelessly? Since you had so little interest in my life, what could my death matter to you?"

If one considers that today no existence whatsoever attains the fullness of its possibilities, suicide would have to be the act that honors the clarity of consciousness of this resignation. If suicide, first of all, points to an absence — that of the possession of life — it also points to a presence — that of the awareness that one prefers the ending of one's life to its separation from oneself, to its alienation, to its continuation when one does not possess any of it. Suicide will continue to destroy human beings for as long as they don't find a path that leads to happiness.

And it is necessary to assume that if such a reversal of perspective — at least a revolution — were to reduce survival to its appropriate role as an appendage of life, this would transform giving death to others and to oneself into acts of equal importance, since a new conception of "respect for life" would imply a radically different responsibility for each individual. Not at all a question of pitiful hope or minimum requirements, this conception leads beyond the confused contrition in which suicide is packaged today.

We are all murderers

From time immemorial, death has been taboo. Taboos are the prohibitions used to maintain the integrity of the organized world and at the same time the good physical and moral health of those who observe them. Anyone who breaks a taboo calls the order of the world into question and this is precisely why she is punished. But taboos constitute prohibitions only within the community that adopts them, having validity only with respect to its members. In many human societies in the past, killing a member of one's community was prohibited, whereas killing an outsider was permitted. Only killing one's like was considered blameworthy. It went so far that many human societies didn't even punish the transgressor who, in turn, wasn't disturbed (in many Inuit tribes, every murder was considered accidental). When a tribal society decided to punish the killer, he would be exiled without the means of survival, but without being killed. Thus, one can understand the significance that some scholars give to the Arab definition of *clan*: "the group in which blood vengeance is not carried out." Vengeance, along with marriage, was a tool with which relationships between different social groups was expressed: vengeance corresponds to the state of war, marriage to the state of peace. Neither vengeance nor marriage were allowed between members of the same group, the same clan, the same family (thus, the taboo against murder and the sexual taboo). Vengeance and marriage were supposed to unite and distance only those who were not already united by the identity of name and kind.

But now there is a single community, which furnishes a name and identity to everyone: the community of Capital. Before being men or women, western or eastern, rich or poor, we are consumers. If we are allowed to have sexual relations, also here with necessary limits, we still cannot kill each other. In the name of the peace of what we have in common — the peace of the market — war is made against what divides us — war against the individual. One better understands why the ruling morality has made “respect life, consider it sacred, never resort to violence” one of its preferred refrains.

Today *tolerance*, in the everyday, relentless form poured out on us by the mass media, has become an obligatory and restrictive constraint directly in the state’s service. If tolerance in the time of the Inquisition was an appeal to tolerate the pyres and to be intolerant of heresy, in the same way, the tolerance of modern democratic humanitarianism consists in an invitation to tolerate the existent and to be intolerant of anyone who opposes it. And of course, this is because beneath the concrete of the supermarket, the uniqueness of our desires, our interests, our aptitudes, our dreams, which distinguish us from one another, pulses unappeased. If the rich have to tolerate the poor and the poor have to tolerate the rich, all this tolerance seems to me to be exclusively to the benefit of the rich. And considering it well, anyone who talks of tolerance has a rotten corpse in his mouth. The secret that no one has the courage to reveal is quickly said: no one tolerates everything, just as no one tolerates nothing. Every one of us tolerates some things, people and ideas, and doesn’t tolerate others. Without exception. This is

why the humanitarian ideology of “respect for life” is only a filthy hypocrisy.

All those who speak of the sacred “value of human life” are hypocrites. There is the democratic politician who, if he is not a defender of capital punishment, votes to give the go-ahead to “humanitarian bombing”. There are his voters, who sit in front of the TV toasting the news of the death of a mafioso. There are the police, legal assassins, and their friends. There are all those who would kill a tyrant, but in the name of a noble ideal. There are the individual suicides, those who practice euthanasia and all their friends. There are those who have been raped and who kill their rapists. There are all the supporters of the Resistance. Anyone could add to the list of examples.

In reality, we are all murderers, at least potentially. If our hands are not already bloodstained, they might be at any moment; it’s only a question of circumstance. On the one hand, we proclaim that life is sacred; on the other hand, we think that not everyone deserves to live. But then, what is it that gives value to human life? We distinguish the life “that is respected” from the one “undeserving of respect” by the existence in the former of a perspective in common with our own. It is only this perspective that determines the value of an individual in our eyes, not abstract membership in the human species. This can take on value only in the absence of more precise information. The life of a perfect stranger might even seem inviolable to us, but as soon as we discovered that he is a child killer, our hand would want a pistol. I am resorting to an easy example, capable of drawing nearly unanimous agreement: child killers. However, we can think of other lives that we

would willingly see destroyed, lives in which we find nothing worth defending.

On the other hand, a life perspective, when it is our perspective, my perspective, is never superfluous. What I think, what I do, what I love, what I believe, this is my world. If I did not possess it, my life on this planet would seem superfluous to me. I would be capable of anything in order to defend, develop and realize this world of mine. Even killing. Why not? The death of someone who puts this world of mine in danger is indifferent to me. This does not mean that I intend to kill all those who are not like me, but only that their disappearance would change nothing in my immediate life. In the midst of the indifference that I feel toward the daily slaughter, I mourn only for those who have shown themselves to be my likes, those whose actions correspond, even if only partially, to my desires. Only their deaths strike me. Those of others, no.

If I hold that, in order to realize my desires, a portion of humanity must be eliminated, what do I do? Should I pursue my aim or submit to a principle that is held to be superior, but without any justification for this superiority? I don't raise this question because I intend to eliminate a portion of humanity (although the group of people who govern our existence would be deserving of a greater effort to achieve this aim) but to desecrate the death taboo that is an obstacle to the realization of any desire.

Part of life

Death is upsetting. But what disturbs our minds is not the supposed survival instinct so much as the dissatisfaction of not having realized everything toward which we all

strive. One always dies much too soon. This totality, impossible to realize today, is furthermore what makes every death unfulfilling. Of course, the approach in the face of death is not the same everywhere. In Somalia, where one dies from hunger like from weapons, it would be impossible to make the poor believe — as happens in Europe — that one could die satisfied after having lived in such an unsatisfactory way, or that death is a calamity regardless of who its victim is.

The prohibitory abuse that our society heavily lays on death has as a consequence the common opinion that claims that life and death are opposites. Nothing is more harmful to life than to consider death to be outside of it; death is part of life as its end, its limit, its boundary. Death is an end, and end much too important for a life to be left to chance. But the importance of how one dies assumes meaning only for one who has taken to heart the importance of how one lives.

“Sagely avoiding the elements of death, we only aim to *preserve* life, whereas by entering the territory that wisdom advises us to avoid, we *live it*.”

[*Diavolo in corpo*, n. 3, 11/2000]

* Or oneself (*tr.*)

** “Recent” as of the year 2000 (*tr.*)

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