PUNCTA
Journal of Critical Phenomenology

A LIVABLE LIFE? AN INHABITABLE WORLD? SCHELER ON THE TRAGIC

JUDITH BUTLER
University of California, Berkeley

Regardless of where we are, and we are in many places, we live now, in the early Spring of 2021, under a new set of conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am not saying that the pandemic creates one condition that can be separated from prevailing social and ecological conditions, but, rather, that the pandemic now configures those prevailing conditions a new way. Those prevailing conditions include: environmental destruction, poverty, racism, global inequalities, social violence, including violence directed against women and sexual minorities. In these pandemic times, some of us are doubtless suffering acute losses and others may be observing those losses from safer parts of the world, but all of us are living in relation to ambient illness and death. Death and illness are quite literally in the air. However differently we register this pandemic—and what it means to register it will prove important to what I have to say about the phenomenology of the senses—we do doubtless understand it as global; it implicates each of us in an interconnected world, a world of living creatures whose capacity to affect one another can be a matter of life or death. I am not sure I would say that this is *a common world* we share, since as much as we might wish to dwell in a common world, I am not sure we currently do. Perhaps it is more apt to say that there are many and overlapping *worlds*, for so many of the major resources of the world are not equitably shared, and there remain those who have only a small or vanished share of the world. We cannot register a global phenomenon such as the pandemic without at once registering those inequalities and, in this current case, seeing those inequalities intensify. We sometimes say in English that those with wealth and protection live in a different world than those who do not. That is a figure of speech, but does it not also communicate a reality? Maybe we ought not to be taken seriously when we speak that way if there is, after all, a singular world that encompasses such inequalities. But what if it remains descriptively true that some worlds are not quite part of that one world, that common world, or that there are zones of life that exist and persist outside the common or the commons?

Perhaps those who dwell in such zones do the work for that common world, and are tied to it through labor, but are not for that reason *of* it, if by "of it" we mean to designate a mode of belonging. Indeed, perhaps those who constitute replaceable labor or who dwell

outside the zone of productivity as recognized by capitalist metrics are considered the refuse, the waste of the common world, or the zone of criminality, Black and brown life, poor, in debt, living in the endless time of unpayable debt, a debt that suffuses life and survives the life of the indebted person. So maybe we need to think about contiguous and overlapping worlds that are uncommon or even, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) argue, belong to an underlying "undercommons." That is a zone of negligence, criminality, but also refuge, experiments in community and art, often undertaken without sufficient funding. If, in light of all this, we still want to talk about a shared world, we might, with Jacques Rancière (2012), talk about "the part of those who have no part"—those for whom participation in the commons is not possible, or no longer is (14). If we were to talk about shares of the world—not financial shares, but part of the common share that is the world—we would have to admit that there is no equitable measure for distributing equal shares of the world. A share would be a form of participation and belonging that could not be measured by economic metrics, and would doubtless demand a measure beyond that metric. For we are not just talking about resources and companies in which a share of stock is to be had, but a common world, a sense of the common, a sense of belonging to a world, or of the world itself as a site of belonging. That is not the same, I think, as a struggle for recognition within the existing social terms, but entails a fundamental transformation of the understanding of value. As such, it is a way of living life with the assumptions that one's life has value, a value beyond market value, and that the world will be structured to facilitate one's flourishing, and that this happens, or will happen, not only for oneself but for everyone else as well.

We are, of course, far from this idea of a common world. The pandemic, and now the distribution of vaccines, illuminates and intensifies racial inequalities, as we know. A large portion of pandemic pain is clustered in some parts of the subjugated and colonized world and in communities of color. In the US, Black and brown people are three times as likely to become infected with the virus as white people, and twice as likely to die (CDC 2021). The statistics cannot explain how it got to be that way, but we can assume that one reason is that it has been accepted within the so-called "common world" that the loss of Black life is simply not as worrisome or grievable as the loss of white life (often described simply as "human life"). Indeed, face to face with such statistical inequalities, we may find ourselves asking, "what kind of world is it in which those statistics are true?" We can mean several things by such a question. We may be asking, "what version of reality do those statistics serve?" Or, "what world is circumscribed by the statistics themselves?" Yet, even as social and economic inequalities are brought into fuller relief under pandemic conditions, and a growing and vulnerable undercommons of abandonment, fugitivity, and experimental life is exposed, there is also a movement in a global direction, one that seems based on a renewed and more acute sense of mortality coupled with a political sense of who dies early, whose death is preventable. For which set of living beings there exist no safeguards, no infrastructural or social promise of continuity, the sense of a life with the supports required to live on? And now we see the global distribution of the vaccine, and the grim reality that countries such as DR Congo and Haiti have access to very few doses, if any at all (Covid-19 Vaccination Tracker). The draw toward a global sense of the world (and let us presume that

a global sense of the world is registered phenomenologically through different senses of the global) is strengthened by a common immunological predicament, even as it is one that we live out very differently depending on where we are and how we socially positioned.

Pandemic is etymologically *pan-demos*, all the people, or perhaps more precisely, the people everywhere, or something that crosses over or spreads over or through the people. It establishes the people as porous and interconnected. The "*demos*" is thus not the citizens of a given state, but all the people despite the legal barriers that seek to separate them. A pandemic operates throughout the world population, but it also afflicts the people as human creatures who bear a susceptibility to viral infection. "The world" that is implied is the everywhere, the *pan*, a world that is threaded together through infection and recovery, by immunity and by fatality. There is no border that stops it from traveling if humans travel, and no social category secures absolute immunity. Indeed, the pretense of power that acts as if it were immune by virtue of its social power is actually one of the most vulnerable to infection, since it throws precautions to the wind, as we see with Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and as we surely saw in lurid detail with the immediate past President of the United States. It is as if the pandemic keeps insisting on the *pan*, the world, but the world keeps dividing into unequally exposed zones. So even though we tend to speak of the world as a singular horizon or even expect that the word, "world," will set the horizon to experience itself, in other contexts, we surely talk about worlds in the plural, and feel that it is imperative to do so. Oddly, we don't generally hear about *worlds of the virus*, but we surely could. If we did, that would suggest that multiple world horizons are operative, horizons that do not always exactly fuse as Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) expected them to; they would be asynchronous horizons, world-limits, as it were, configured through different temporalities that overlap and diverge but do not fully converge.

Some have thought that we need to shake this notion of the world and turn to the planetary as a decidedly less anthropocentric concept. The planetary can furnish a critical perspective on geographical maps that are invariably geopolitical, whose lines are the accomplishments of those who vanquish, national boundaries usually forged through war or colonization. Achille Mbembe (2019) argues, "[t]he political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common." However, he argues, if we consider the plundering of the earth's resources for the purposes of corporate profit, privatization, and colonization itself as planetary project or enterprise, then it makes sense that the true opposition, the one that does not send us back to our egos, our barriers, and identities, will be a form of "decolonization [which] is by definition a planetary enterprise, a radical openness of and to the world, *a deep breathing* for the world as opposed to insulation" (my emphasis). The planetary opposition to extraction and systemic racism ought to then deliver us back to the world, or let the world arrive, as if for the first time, in a way that allows for a "deep breathing"—a desire we all know now, if we have not already forgotten how to wish for it.

PANDEMIC WORLDS

There are, of course, many ways to approach this question of the world, including the now complicated debates about "world" literature (Prendergast 2004). Sometimes there, we find distinctions like "European" literature and "world" literature, as if the world is every other place outside of Europe or the Anglo-American context. In other words, the center of the world gets a place name, but all those other locations of literature are elsewhere and, therefore, the world. A vast domain and without proper names, the world becomes an elsewhere. In contrast, there is the important work of María Lugones, decolonial feminist who in 1987 wrote on "world-travelling," offering a counter-imperialist account of moving from one's own world to another's world in order to undergo a transformation in the direction of a more loving perception of alterity. That work is now thirty-three years old, but addresses readers across the world at the same time that it marks those separated worlds, underscoring the risk of disorientation in entering another world, another language, or epistemic field. Lugones underscores the importance of letting one's epistemic field—one's very sense of the limit and structure of the world—become upended and reoriented in the course of an encounter in which one becomes willing to suspend or forfeit the coordinates of the world one has known in an effort to reach and apprehend another.

The pandemic has brought with it this oscillation between world and worlds. Whereas some insist that the pandemic intensifies all that was already wrong with the world, and others suggest that the pandemic opens us to a new sense of global interconnection and interdependency, both propositions are wagers that emerge in the midst of contemporary disorientation. No matter how located and differentiated the ways that pandemic registers for people across the world, it remains understood as a phenomenon, a force, a crisis, even a condition, that extends throughout the world, and that in being treated as a condition of the world, figures the world (or gives forth the world) in some quite specific ways. In other words, no one, no matter where they are, is not thinking about the world. Although some nations, like the US, have reverted to hyper-nationalist frameworks for understanding the virus and its effects, competing, even, with the rest of the world to monopolize vaccinations, their efforts nevertheless index the world in some way. And though some regions seem to have escaped the worst ravages of the COVID-19 by chance or have contained its effect through deliberate forms of social conduct, no region is in principle immune. No region, no bounded entity, indeed, no discrete body is by definition immune in advance. For a pandemic names a global susceptibility, a potential suffering, that belongs to human life in its immunological relationship to the world, one that is part of the world for now, and perhaps for an indefinite period of time. Once it becomes endemic, it will be an enduring part of the world. Interestingly, we do not have a noun for that: "there is an endemic unleashed on the world!"—no, such a phrase cannot be: a pandemic can be unleashed, but an illness that becomes endemic becomes part of the very fabric of the world, the experience of the world, a new sense of the world when all the unleashing has come to an end. But even when this pandemic fades, immunological vulnerability will certainly not. And if we hate the virus for the vulnerability it exposes, we ought not for that reason conclude that the absence of the virus will eradicate that vulnerability. Immunologically considered,

the vulnerability foregrounded by the virus is a function of the fact that what is foreign or exogenous is always a part of any organism—a position defended by co-constructionists for many years, including, most recently, Thomas Pradeu (2012).[1] The problem with the virus is not that it is foreign, but that it is new, and that our immunological systems, or most of ours, have no ready way to recognize it and to fight against it. The thesis of co-constructionists is that the organism is constructed by its environment even as it constructs that environment in return.[2] The aim of a co-constructionist theory is less to distinguish what belongs to the self and what does not than to understand the immunological problem produced by pandemics as an unpreparedness for what is unprecedented. Of course, if there were no analogies to other viruses such as SARS viruses, then the adenovirus vaccines would be declared useless from the start. And Messenger RNA vaccines which seek to mimic the shape of the virus so that we develop the immunological capacity to identify, react, and fight it also rely on the possibility of recognizing a similar structure. Both analogy and mimicry are crucial to strengthening the immune system in this context. At the same time, however, the immune system is not only challenged by what comes from outside, but also from the organism itself, which is why autoimmune attacks, those waged by the organism against itself, are very often the inflammatory consequence of new forms of viral infections. I underscore this point because too often the virus is said to come from a place, a foreign place—China, Brazil, South Africa—and described as imported without proper papers into the body politic, at which point it is considered that public and national health is damaged by what is foreign. That seems to me more of an immigration analogy within a nationalist imaginary than an immunological model. I underscore this because the organism cannot survive without ingesting foreign elements, and it can be more acutely at risk from its autoimmune condition than anything foreign. The world is not just out there as the backdrop for human action, but is on a daily basis incorporated into the body itself, suggesting a vital connection between body and world. Call me a Lucretian, if you must, but we won't be able to understanding shared vulnerability and interdependency unless we concede that we pass the air we breathe to one another, that we share the surfaces of the world, and that we cannot touch another without also being touched.

MAX SCHELER'S TRAGIC SENSE

I will turn to phenomenology, and especially the work of Max Scheler (1954), in order to understand better the ordinary language example I referenced above—a question often now uttered in anguish or surprise: *what kind of a world is this in which such a thing like this can*

[1] See Thomas Pradeu (2012). Pradeu argues against the immunological framework that accepts a self/non-self dichotomy in favor of a continuity thesis that emphasizes reactive patterns and memories in the organism's immune system, as it were, and underscores that challenges to that system can be endogenous or exogenous, and that the challenge consists in a rupture of the pattern of interactivity. The problem is not the acceptance or rejection of what is foreign, but the creation of new patterns of interactivity.

[2] We see a version of this theory in Anne Fausto-Sterling's (2000) work as well, with important implications for reformulating the sex/gender distinction.

happen!? But let me first make some preliminary remarks about the contexts in which an enunciation appears. It may emerge because I am living in the aftermath of a regime that happily destroyed democratic institutions in a daily way or because my region is subject to massively destructive fires as the result of climate change, or because white supremacists are on the rise and congregating near or on campus, and that all of this happens within the context of a pandemic that continues to surge and strike after relative periods of abeyance. I would suggest that the question, "w*hat kind of world is this?"*, seeks to fathom the world in which such a virus can happen. It is not just that the virus is new, but that the world is now exhibited or disclosed as a different sort of world that we once thought it was. The aspect of the world is transformed by the emergence of the virus and its effects. Of course, I would not argue that what emerges now is an altogether new idea of the world, since pandemics have happened before, and the world was always a place where pandemics could happen, or so it has seemed for several centuries. I am suggesting only that something about the pandemic makes us reconsider the world as our object of scrutiny, register the world as a cause for alarm, mark the fact that this present version of the world was not anticipated, and register the world as bearing a new kind of opacity rather suddenly and as imposing a new set of limits.

When we exclaim in that way, we are asking about the world, taking the world as our object, or seeing that the world has taken us up in a new way. The world the virus discloses or makes more clearly manifest—and unevenly permeates—is not only a map or a picture, but something exhibited in the course of viral circulation and its effects. Of course, we may be given graphic pictures of the virus with its blue crown and spikes, and when these representations fill our screens, they stand in for a viral condition that they cannot adequately represent. They are closer to the logo of the virus, analogous to an advertisement for Disney World. The pictures function as abbreviated graphic forms that take the virus out of the quick and invisible time of its action and circulation and splash it with color, distill its spikes as a crown. Although the daily graphs and maps which seek to produce a picture of the viral world are surely useful, they provide a skewed understanding of the pandemic character of the virus by virtue of the pictorial form. Martin Heidegger (1977) claimed that the world picture does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as a picture (129). He raised questions about whether the world could or should be conceived that way, and what it meant that pictures were coming to stand for the world. He pointed out that the subject who stands before such a world picture, seeks not only to grasp that visual version of the world in its entirety, but finds itself exempt from the world it seeks to know. Sometimes we find that conceit operating in the media, and it consoles us by presuming that we are not part of the picture that we see. And yet, the effort to grasp the virus in pictorial or graphic terms does not actually secure the immunity of the perceiving subject. We are in the picture that we see, and the distance established by spectatorship is one that denies or, at least, suspends, what it means to be implicated in the phenomenon that one seeks to know.

Does this sense of being implicated change, though, when we understand the viral world, or the sense of the world given by the virus, as one that pertains to touch and to breathing, to proximity and distance as it works in invisible ways to produce existential

effects? Part of what makes it frightening is that we cannot see it in everyday life without a rather powerful technological instrument. We are left with anxious inference. Do you have it? Where is it? For all those reasons, I am drawn back to phenomenology, or perhaps compelled to draw it forward in order to understand the phenomenon as exhibiting a sense of world, or a world that is given to us in part through the senses.

One text that considers this sudden exhibition of the world in a new way is "On the Tragic" that Max Scheler published in German in 1915, the same year that Freud published his *Reflections on War and Death*, and the second year of the first World War.[3] The text works in a heterodox way with Husserlian phenomenology, taking distance from those who would center phenomenological analysis in the subject. Edmund Husserl had opened up a debate within the field, one that became stronger in the 1930s through the 1950s about whether the correlations between the subjective and objective worlds (called noetic and noematic correlates) should emphasize one pole rather than the other. Is there a transcendental subject who constitutes the world from its own *a priori* structures, or does the world impose itself on our perception in ways that suggest that the ego and the subject are, in fact, superfluous? Ludwig Landgrebe, a Belgian philosopher, in the inaugural issue of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 1940 made a strong case that that the subject is the constitutive origin of the world, and that this does not primarily involve a thematization of the world. Although we are each born into an already constituted world, phenomenology asks us to bracket that world as we ask about its origins. The question of the origin of the world is not, for Landgrebe, a question of causality but rather one of constitution, and for that there has to be a horizon. What is worldly, i.e., what belongs to or is *of* the world, appears within a pre-given horizon at the same time that it must be constituted as an appearance through a transcendental subjectivity. Landgrebe may not have had Scheler in mind, since Jean-Paul Sartre had already put forth his proposition to transcend the ego altogether in 1937, and, even earlier, numerous Husserlians, such as Aron Gurwitsch, were arguing that perhaps there is no transcendental ego or subject, but only, at best, a transcendental field.

Writing twenty-five years earlier, Scheler was deeply influenced by Husserl, but decided that his approach to phenomenology evacuated objective reality, including objective features of the world. The essay treats the tragic as a kind of phenomenon, a noematic cluster, as the Husserlians might say, but one that is not primarily constituted by consciousness or acts of projection or interpretation. In that essay, he offers a way to think about the tragic that clearly departs from an Aristotelian understanding of tragic action according to which the unfolding of a dire set of consequences unfolds according to rules of likelihood and probability. The tragic, for Scheler, is not regulated by rules. Oddly, the tragic is not found in the character of a play nor is it an exclusively aesthetic problem; it neither defines a genre nor a character with a flaw, brought down by *akrasia* or weakness. Scheler's text surprises with its suggestion that we consider the tragic as a way in which the world exhibits itself. The tragic appears by virtue of human events, but it is

[3] The most accessible English version of this essay is "On the Tragic" in *The Questions of Tragedy*, edited by Arthur B. Coffin (1991). However, citations in this article are from the same essay, published as "On the Tragic" in *CrossCurrents* (1954).

not the specificity of the human that it shows. Rather, it is a feature of the world, one of its qualities. "The tragic," he writes,

> is above all a property (ein Merkmal) which we observe in events, fortunes, characters, and the like, and which actually exists in them. *We might say that it is given off by them like a heavy breath* (ein schwerer, kuehler Hauch, der von diesen Dingen selbst ausgeht) or seems like an obscure glimmering that surrounds them. In it a specific feature of the world's makeup appears before us, and not a condition of our own ego, nor its emotions, nor its experience of compassion. (1954, 178)

If we doubted whether his essay could speak to us in pandemic times, consider that, in addition to the heavy breath, the tragic depends, he writes, "on aerobic emanations" (Scheler 1919, 240, author's translation)[4]—just like the virus—leading one to speculate whether the tragic has viral character, moving and encircling as a virus does. It is a heavy breath that gives off something, and some lingering aerosol traces are apparently illuminated by a special kind of light.

Although Scheler (1954) sought to establish the objectivity of a wide range of phenomena that seem implausible, such as "a hierarchy of values" (180), I find it interesting that this term, "the tragic," has an objective aura in his writing. The tragic happens by virtue of events, but it is not an event. At most, on Scheler's account, it is a category under which certain kinds of experiences are gathered. He draws our attention to a relatively simple formulation: "to belong to the category of the tragic some value must be destroyed" (180). I take it that the kind of value destroyed in "the tragic" is one that is difficult to imagine as subject to destruction. What is that value? Or how might that set of values be circumscribed? The tragic is not the same as a sadness that knows and names what it is sad about. When we speak about tragic grief, in his view, it "contains a definite composure" or sense of peace (181-182). And, importantly, it extends *beyond the horizon* of the world. It is less a consequence of our own action than the result of something arriving from the outside and subsequently permeating the soul—his phrase. Even as the tragic is occasioned by *events*—what comes to be understood as tragic events—the tragic can never be reduced to the event which is its occasion; it persists, rather, as *a kind of atmosphere (geistige Atmosphaere)*, one in which an uncompromising and inevitable destruction of a value takes place. In this way, though the tragic event is an occasion for the tragic, something more is exhibited, namely, a set of components that, taken together, constitute the very makeup of the world. It is these components, Scheler writes, which "make such a thing possible" (182). In other words, the event exhibits something about the world: the event is its occasion, but the world is at once its condition and the phenomenon itself: "the tragic is always concerned with what is individual, singular, but at the same time, the constitution of the world itself [eine Konstitution der Welt selbst]" (Scheler 1919, 249, author's translation).[5] So, it is clearly

[4] "Es ist ein schwerer, kühler Hauch, der von diesen Dingen selbst ausgeht, ein dunkler Schimmer, der die umfließt und in dem uns eine bestimmte Beschaffenheit der Welt …"

5 "Das ist nicht eine allgemeine, in Begriffen bestimmbare Weltkonstitution, die angesichts aller fen bestimmbare Weltkonstitution, die angesichts aller tragischen Vorkommnisse dieselbe wäre, sondern

not the case, for Scheler, that the world is constituted through a transcendental subject. Rather, on the occasion of great loss and destruction of something or someone valuable or, perhaps more precisely, some value that they bear, the tragic emerges, consisting not only in the grief over the one lost, but the shock or bewilderment that the world is such that such an event can happen.

My wager is that Scheler names this sense of the tragic residing in the exclamatory fragment, "what kind of world is this in which such a thing can happen?!"; it is not just this event, this loss or the destruction of this value, but the world in which such a destruction is possible or, perhaps, the world in which such a destruction has become possible. The wager of Scheler's (1954) intense anti-subjectivism is that in or through the tragic event, "we are directly confronted with a definite condition of the world's makeup without deliberation or any sort of 'interpretation'" (182). Here is the longer version of his argument:

> This confronts us in the event itself; it does not result from what it does to the things which brought it about. It is only momentarily connected with the event and is independent of the elements that make it a determined event. The depth is brought about by the fact that its subject is twofold. One is the element of the event that has been seen by us. The other is that point in the world's makeup (constitution) that is exemplified by the event and of which the event is but an example. Grief seems to pour out from the event into unlimited space (beyond the horizon of the world). It is not a universal, abstract world-constitution that would be the same in all tragic events. It is rather a definite, individual element of the world's construction. The remote subject of the tragic is always the world itself, the world taken as a whole which makes such a thing possible. This "world" itself seems to be the object immersed in sorrow. (182)

The text suggests that the point is precisely not to say, "oh, the loss of this or that life is not important, but only the loss of a sense of *world* in which those events remained unimaginable." No, it is about the life and the world in which such a life has lived. It is both at once. It is the movement between the two. The sorrow, in fact, moves between life and world, the event of loss, singular and irreversible, and the world, now in its unpicturable entirety immersed in sorrow. In some ways, this is true insofar as the stories of loss overlap: the cell phone at the hospital; the getting barred at the hospital door; the inability to get to a hospital or to gain admission. They refer to this loss and that loss, each very specific losses, and yet as the mode of reference repeats across its occasions, a looming world of loss emerges, or perhaps its ambient atmosphere becomes, or threatens to become, the air itself, or the very way that the air is registered here and now. We breathe, and that means we are alive in some sense. But if potential and actual grief is in the air we breathe, then the breath is now the means of passage for the virus and for the grief that sometimes follows, as well as the life that survives.

But Scheler suggest that, with the tragic, a value is destroyed. What is that value? What are those values? One value is touch. The other is breath. Another is the complex surfaces

immer eine besondere, individuelle, eigenartige, aber gleichwohl eine Konstitution der Welt selbst."

and enclosures of the world—the infrastructure of habitation, figured both as shelter and refuge but also as a potentially dangerous enclosure. I am hardly saying anything new when I make the normative claim that the world of surfaces and the air we breathe should function as supports for life itself. Under pandemic conditions, the very elements upon which we depend for life carry the potential to take life: we come to worry about touch and breath, proximity, loud shouts of joy, dancing too closely. That is a drag, something that drags us down, a kind of perpetual sorrow that afflicts all the joints of sociality. Taking Scheler as a point of departure, then, I want to ask more about how to live a life under such conditions, and more generally ask about the conditions of a livable life. It is as if the basic requirements for life have been laid bare, and that we become aware of the easier, less self-conscious, ways of touching and breathing that we perhaps had before. We lose the kinds of proximity that we valued; we lose touch, tactility as a sense, and connection. We recede into boundaries, if we have them and can afford them, of selfhood and space, of shelter and household, of neighborhood paths, as the value of extra-domestic intimacy and sociality is lost, as we, as it were, lose touch across the enforced distances.

It is of course this or that loved person, or this or that kind of gathering, that we surely miss, or have missed, but it is also the constriction of the horizon that delimits what we call the world. So perhaps the problem is not only the one that Scheler specifies as tragic—the world in which such viral threat and destruction is possible—but also the question of life: what it means to live as a living creature, a creature among creatures, a life among living processes, under conditions such as these? He mentions a kind of guilt that is associated with the tragic, but it is not one that leads back to the actions of the individual. It is a sense of responsibility that emerges, it seems, from the structure of the world itself, from the fact that we are responsible for one another even though we cannot hold ourselves personally responsible for creating the conditions and instruments of harm. In his words, “The tragic consists—at least in human tragedies—not simply in the absence of ‘guilt’ but rather in the fact that the guiltiness cannot be localized” (1954, 187). In fact, the sense of the tragic increases as it becomes impossible to pinpoint the blame for events.

The restrictions are, of course, occasions for new experimentations, communities of care that are not bound by households, that establish kin beyond the nuclear and normative family. But there is also the sense that a partially stopped economy has given the environment a chance to renew and repair. Strangers treat each other not only with paranoia, but also with remarkable solicitude. Social movements, like Black Lives Matter, take to the streets in masks, and apparently act in responsible enough ways so that no spikes in the virus are traced to those impressive and ongoing movements for social and economic justice. The case for national health care has never seemed stronger where I live; the case for a guaranteed national income is now more possible than before. Socialist ideals are renewed. And the movements to abolish prisons and defund the police are no longer “crazy” pipedreams, as opponents would claim, but are openly debated in city councils and regional authorities. And there is some form of grief and solidarity that cross the social and economic lines that so often tend to separate human creatures from one another. Those who insist on denying the death, the loss, the stunning forms of economic and social inequality may well be losing power.

The pandemic condition links us, establishes our ties as both precarious and persistent. The metric that tells us which lives are worth safeguarding and which lives are not is clear to see and to oppose. As is the metric that establishes acceptable levels of death—universities and business are making this determination even if they do not acknowledge that they do. And such decisions target Black and brown people, the elderly, those with preexisting health conditions, the poor, the homeless, those with disabilities, and the incarcerated, including those stalled at the border or subject to over-populated detention camps. In opposition to all these forms of destitution, there are new and renewed mobilizations, and they appear to be gaining in strength and number. They are each appalled by the world as it is currently constituted and endeavoring to constitute a different kind of world. And yet, it is not fully within their power to make the world anew, for the world has made clear that there are conditions and limits to human action, and that human action is not the center of the world.

HOW TO LIVE?

The question "what kind of world is this?" presupposes another question: how are we to live in this world? And then perhaps a further set of questions: given this world, what makes for a livable life? And what makes for an inhabitable world? For if we radically question the world in which the destruction of basic values is possible, if that world leads us to a certain line of questioning, it seems to me that one reason we exclaim about the world in that way is that we are not sure how best to live in such a world, and what a livable life would be. And we see, perhaps more clearly than before—or in a different way—that the possibility of a livable life depends upon an inhabitable world. In concluding, I wish to think about those two latter questions and see whether Scheler's formulation can help to answer them, or whether it meets its limits there.

To make a demand for a livable life is to demand that a life has the power to live. If we ask the question, what makes a life livable, we do so precisely because we know that under some conditions it surely is not, that there are unlivable conditions of poverty, incarceration, or destitution or social and sexual violence, including homophobic, transphobic, racist violence, and violence against women. Implicit in the question, "how long can I live like this?," is an assumption that there must be other ways of living, and that we can, or rather must, distinguish between forms of life that are livable and those that are unlivable. When the question "how can I live like this?" becomes a conviction—"I will *not* continue to live like this"—we are in the midst of an urgent philosophical and social question: what are the conditions that permit life to be lived in a way that affirms the continuation of life itself? And with whom shall I join my life in order to assert the values of our lives? These questions are different from "what is the good life?" or even the older existential question, "what is the meaning of life?"

As I suggested at the outset, the question of what makes a life livable is linked with the question, what makes for an inhabitable world. This last was not Scheler's question, but

it follows from the world that he describes, the world that he claims is exhibited through the tragic. When the world is an object immersed in sorrow, how is it possible to inhabit such a world? What about the persistence of uninhabitable sorrow? The answer lies less in individual conduct or practice than in the forms of solidarity that emerge, across whatever distance, to produce the conditions for inhabiting the world. Am I restoring the place of the subject to the discussion after Scheler has rather emphatically dismissed it? Or am I shifting the discussion to the question of life, of living, and the livable, and not just in the anthropocentric senses of those terms? We have considered the negative wonder, recoil, even shock: *not the event as such, but the world in which such an event can happen*. But if such an event happens, and the world proves to be a place where it can, then, how to live in such a world? And how is such a world made livable?

This last question is slightly different from the second one I mentioned: "What is an *inhabitable* world?" This last question seems to be close cousins to, "what does it mean to live a livable life?" But these are two different questions. The first asserts the world as primary perhaps in the spirit of Scheler, but it adds the human back into the equation through its form of life, one that is connected to other life forms such that another question is spawned: how, then, can the world be inhabited by human and non-human creatures? The second asserts a distinction between a life that is livable and one that is unlivable, a distinction that actually belongs more properly to a spectrum of more and less livable lives. When we speak about the world, we are already speaking about inhabitation. It would be different if we were speaking about the earth. The earth persists in many places without being inhabited by humans, but a world always implies a space and time of inhabitation. A world includes the temporal and spatial coordinates in which a life is lived. If the world is uninhabitable, then destruction has had its way with the world. If a life is unlivable, then the conditions of livability have been destroyed. The destruction of the earth through climate change makes for an uninhabitable world: it reminds us of the necessity of limits on the human inhabitation of the environment, the fact that we cannot inhabit all of the earth without destroying the earth, and that imposing limits on where and how we live is necessary to preserve the earth which, in turn, preserves our lives. Perhaps it sounds simplistic to say, but there are better and worse ways for humans to inhabit the world. And sometimes the earth can only survive—and regenerate—only if limits are set on the reach of human habitation. Humans impose limits imposed on themselves in order to make for a habitable world under conditions of climate change. The world in which one lives includes the earth, depends upon the earth, cannot exist without the earth. Moreover, a life proves not to be livable if the world is not inhabitable. Part of what it means to live, then, and to live in a way that is livable is to have a place to live, a part of the earth than can be inhabited without destroying that earth, to have shelter, and to be able to dwell as a body in a world that is sustained and safeguarded by the structures (and infrastructures) in which one lives—to be part of what is common, to share in a world in common. To inhabit a world is part of what makes a life livable. So, we cannot finally separate the question of an inhabitable world from a livable life. If we, as humans, inhabit the earth without regard for biodiversity, without stopping climate change, without limiting carbon emissions, then we produce for ourselves an uninhabitable world. The world may not be the same as the

earth, but if we destroy the earth, we also destroy our worlds. And if we live human lives with no limits on our freedom, then we enjoy our freedom at the expense of a livable life. We make our own lives unlivable in the name of our freedom. Or, rather, we make our world uninhabitable and our lives unlivable too often in the name of a personal liberty that values itself over all other values, and that becomes an instrument by which social bonds and livable worlds are destroyed. Personal liberty, then, in some of its variations must be seen as world-destroying power. I am certainly not against personal liberty, but the destructive form seems to me to be less about the person or the individual than about a national sense of belonging and even a market sense of profit and gain. There is another form of freedom that is sidelines by this one, and it emerges in the midst of social life, a life that seeks a common world, a life that is free to seek a common world.

SOCIALITY AND SOLIDARITY

This essay has deliberately veered between philosophical investigation and political reflection in light of a present moment defined in part by the pandemic. I suggested earlier that there are some opposing views on what the pandemic prefigures about the social and economic world. We have seen that precarity and poverty have become intensified, and yet many are hopeful about redefining both sociality and solidarity during this time, and renewing demands for networks of care and interdependency that extend globally. The boundaries of the body presumed by most forms of individualism have been called into question as the invariable porosity of the body, its openings, its mucosal linings, its wind pipes, all become salient in matters of life and death. How then do we rethink bodily relations of interdependency, intertwinement, and porosity during these times? Or, rather, how do these times, and this world, already shifting in intensity, offer a chance to reflect upon interdependency, intertwinement, and porosity? Further, do these very concepts give us a new way to understand social equality and inequality? My wager is that the vexed and overlapping senses of sociality and livability can revise some of our key political concepts. I apologize in advance that I only have questions to answer, but my presupposition, itself part of the phenomenological legacy, is that the questioner is implicated in the question, and that the question to some degree seeks to open up a thought, perhaps beyond the settled horizons of both academic inquiry and ordinary experience.

At the outset of this essay, I noted the distinction between the world and the planet, citing Mbembe, suggesting that the devastation of the planet requires a planetary strategy that would allow us to imagine a world, a common world in which to breathe. I also mentioned that Husserl set up a correlation between consciousness and its world, the noetic and noematic poles of experience. And I noted that Scheler seeks in some ways to displace the transcendental subject with an emphasis on the world in its objectivity, understanding the tragic as a way in which the world leaves its impress and provokes a sorrow that exceeds the limits of experience, the horizon of the world. With Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the entire idea of correlation proves impoverished in light of the embodied character of consciousness. For the salient problem for him is neither that the world is structured in such a way that

I may know it, nor that my modes of knowing are structured in such a way to adequately apprehend the world. It is rather that I am, as a body, part of the world I seek to know, already over there, seen, mobile, and mattering. The spatial limits of the perceived body belie its proper reach, for it is always both here and there, rooted and transported. The world that is usually assumed to be over there, or around me, is in fact already in and on me, and there is no easy way around that form of adherence. My reflexivity, my capacity to see or feel myself, oscillated between subject and object poles of experience. In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty (1964) puts it this way:

> [M]y body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive to itself … [It is a self lacking transparency] … through confusion, narcissism, through inherence of the one who sees in that which [one] sees, and through [the] inherence of sensing in the sensed—a self, therefore, that is caught up in things, that has a front and a back, a past and a future. … (162-163)

He continues, "[t]hings … are incrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition …" (163).

In his posthumous work, published as *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) goes even further. It is by virtue of a tangible world that I can touch anything at all. The power of touch does not originate with me. The tangible, rather, understood as a field, domain or even "world" is thus there as I touch something, and as I feel my own touch, or redouble my touch in touching myself touching something else. From the touch springs forth an understanding of the tangible as a field in which these forms of object-relations and self-relations are condensed and intertwined and this reversibility of relations are constitutive of the tangible itself. So, though my body is, for instance, over here (in pandemic conditions, it is emphatically over here, hemmed in, enclosed) and is not elsewhere (except in those instances when it can be), it is still over there, in the objects I touch (I can touch, I do touch) precisely because this body belongs to a field of flesh, or a world of flesh, whose instances are not exactly united, but whose differences constitute the field itself. Flesh (*le chair*) is the understanding of the delimited body from the point of view of inter-relatedness.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) himself puts equal emphasis on the claim that "one cannot say that it is *here* or *now* in the sense that objects are" (147). And though, he writes, "I am always on the same side of my body," what I touch opens up a world of objects and surfaces that are touched and touchable by others (148). So, though I am not joined with that unity or those others who have touched that surface, are touching it now, or will surely touch it in the future, those disparate moments imply one another, are linked with one another, although they are never summarized in a temporal or conceptual unity. Echoing Scheler's contention that the tragic illuminates or discloses something constitutive about the world, Merleau-Ponty insists that in naming the name-able is opened up; in seeing, the visible looms; and in touching, the tangible leaves its impress upon us.

Intersubjectively considered (and I am moving quickly between intertwinement [*entrelac*], interconnection, and inter-relatedness), the touch of the other is something that I feel, and in some sense, I touch what is touching me in the act of being touched. Every passivity fails to become absolute. And if I imagine myself as only doing the touching, the only doer in the scene, my pretensions are undone because there is always this receptivity of the other's flesh, and so a being touched in the act of touching. Receptivity is already a touching back. The polarities of activity and passivity are complicated in this view, as is the distinct way of separating consciousness from its world. The body and its senses introduce a sense of bodies interlaced with one another that moves beyond such binary oppositions. The ways we are bound up with one another are not precisely contingent. To be a body at all is to be bound up with others and with objects, with surfaces, and the elements, including the air that is breathed in and out, air that belongs to no one and everyone.

INHABITABLE WORLD, LIVABLE LIFE

I suggest that this way of thinking has both ethical and political consequences for our times, for it offers a way of understanding interdependency that moves beyond the ontology of isolated individuals encased in discrete bodies. Perhaps this is what we already know pre-philosophically, but perhaps as well phenomenology can articulate this nascent or emergent understanding for our times. To do so, however, it has to be brought into a broader political world. First, then, politics, including the contemporary politics of work and lockdown, and then bodies, a way forward for phenomenology that might link the idea of an inhabitable world to the condition of climate destruction. If life depends on air that is passed among us, and food and shelter, derived from the resources of nature, then climate destruction brings these life requirements to the fore in a different way, and at the same time, as the pandemic.

Air, water, shelter, clothing, and access to health care are not only sites of anxiety within the pandemic and compromised under climate change, but they also constitute requirements of life, of continuing to live, and it is the poor who suffer most from not having clean water, proper shelter, breathable air, access to health care. So, under conditions of deprivation, the question of whether or not one is living a livable life is an urgent economic one: are there health service and shelters and clean enough water for any number of people to live, and for all those who are related to me to live. The existential urgency of the question is heightened by economic precarity, and that precarity is intensified under the present conditions of pandemic.

Of course, humans have different experiences of the limit of livability. And whether or not a set of restrictions are livable depends on how one gauges the requirements of one's life. "Livability" is in the end a modest requirement. One is not, for instance, asking, what will make me happy? Nor is one asking, what kind of life would most clearly satisfy my desires? One is looking, rather, to live in such a way that life itself remains bearable so that one can continue to live. In other words, one is looking for those requirements of a

life that allow a life to be sustained and to continue. Another way of saying this would be: what are the conditions of life that make possible the desire to live? For we surely know that under some conditions of restriction—incarceration, occupation, detention, torture, statelessness—one may ask, is life worth living under these conditions? And in some cases, the very desire to live is extinguished, and people do take their lives, or submit to slower forms of death dealt by slower forms of violence.

The pandemic poses questions that are specifically ethical. For the restrictions under which I am asked to live are those that protect not just my own life, but the lives of others as well. Our lives are knotted together or, perhaps, intertwined. The restrictions stop me from acting in certain ways, but they also lay out a vision of the interconnected world that I am asked to accept. If they were to speak, they would ask me to understand this life that I live as bound up with other lives, and to regard this "being bound up with one another" as a fundamental feature of who I am, since I am not fully sealed as a bounded creature, but emit breath into a shared world where I take in air that has been circulating through the lungs of others. The reason I am restricted from visiting any number of places is both self-protection and the protection of others: I am being stopped from contracting a virus that could take my life, but also from communicating a virus that I may not know that I have, and that could debilitate or take the lives of others. In other words, I am asked not to die, and not to put others at risk of illness or death. The same kinds of actions bear the same sorts of risks. So, I must decide whether to comply with that request. To understand and accept both parts of that request, I must understand myself as capable of communicating the virus, but also as someone who can be infected by the virus, so potentially both acting and acted upon. There is no escape from either end of that polarity, a risk that correlates with the two-fold dimension of breathing itself: inhalation, exhalation. It seems as if I am bound up with others through the prospect of doing or suffering harm in relation to them. The ethical quandary, or vector, that the pandemic produces begins with the insight that my life and the lives of others depend upon a recognition of how our lives depend in part upon how each of us acts. So, my action holds your life, and your action holds mine, at least potentially. If I come from a state like the US where self-interest governs everyday moral deliberations, I am used to acting on my own behalf and deciding whether and how a consideration of others comes into play. But in the ethical paradigm that belongs to the pandemic, I am already in relation to you, and you are already in relation to me, way before either of us starts to deliberate on how best to relate to one another. We are quite literally in each other's bodies without any deliberate intention to be there. If we were not, we would have no fear. We share air and surfaces, we brush up against each other by accident or by design, or consent; we are strangers near each other on the plane, and the package I wrap may be the one you open or carry, or drop at my door at the moment when I open the door and we find ourselves face to face. According to prevailing frameworks of self-interest, we act as if our separate lives come first and then we decide on our social arrangements—that is a liberal conceit that underwrites a great deal of moral philosophy. We somehow exist before and outside the contracts that bind us, and we give up our individuality and unrestrained freedom when we enter those contracts. But why do we assume individuality from the start when it is clear formed and, as psychoanalysis contends, a tenuous achievement at best?

If we ask, how and when did my life first become imaginable as a separate life, we can see that the question itself starts to unfold an answer. Individuality is an imagined status and depends on specifically social forms of the imaginary. In fact, the early stages of infancy are marked by primary helplessness, and survival of the infant depends on a range of materials and practices of care that secure nutrition, shelter, and warmth. The question of food and sleep and shelter were never separable from the question of one's life, its very livability. Those provisions must have been there, even if minimally, for any of us to begin a life which would come to include the imagining of a separate "I." That dependency on others, on provisions, on all that we could not possibly give ourselves, had to be put aside if not fully denied for any of us to decide one day that one is a singular individual, distinct and spatially closed off from others, not only separated, but *separate*. All individuation is haunted by a dependency that is imagined as if it could be overcome or has already been vanquished. And yet individuals fully isolated and on their own in the pandemic are among the most imperiled. How to live without touch or being touched, without the shared breath? Is that livable? If my "life" is from the start only ambiguously my own, then the field of social interdependency enters from the start, prior to any deliberation on moral conduct or the benefits of social contracts voluntarily entered (not all are voluntary). The question "what should I do?" or even "how do I live this life?" presupposes an "I" and a "life" that poses that question on its own and for itself alone. But if we accept that the "I" is always populated, and life is always implicated in other lives and life forms, then how do those moral questions change? How have they already changed under conditions of pandemic?

Of course, it is difficult to shake the presumption that when we talk about this life, we are talking about this discrete and bounded individual life and its finitude. No one can die in my place. No one can even go to the bathroom in my place! Further, what makes a life livable seems to be a personal question, pertaining to this life and not to any other life. And yet, when I ask what makes "a life" livable, I seem to accept that some shared conditions make human lives livable. If so, then at least some part of what makes my own life livable makes another life livable as well, and I cannot then fully dissociate the question of my own well-being from the well-being of others. The virus does not let us think another way, unless of course we turn away from what we know about the virus, as some notorious government officials have done, dragging countless others along with them. If the pandemic gives us one rather large social and ethical lesson to learn, my wager is that this seems to be it: What makes a life livable is a question that implicitly shows us that the life we live is never exclusively our own, that the conditions for a livable life have to be secured, and not just for me, but for lives and living processes more generally. Those conditions cannot be grasped, for instance, if the category of private property describes my body or individualism is accepted as a methodology. The "I" who I am is also to some extent a "we" even as tensions tend to mark the relation of these two senses of one's life. If it is this life that is mine, it seems then to be mine, and the logic of identity has won the argument with a tautological flourish. But if my life is never fully my own; if life names a condition and trajectory that is shared, then life is the place where I lose my self-centeredness and discover the porous character of my embodiment. In fact, the phrase

"my life" tends to pull in two directions at once: this life, singular, irreplaceable; this life, shared and human, shared as well with animal lives and with various systems and networks of life. I require living processes and living others to live, which means that I am nothing without them. This life, I would suggest, is densely populated before I start to live it, and must be for me to live at all. Others precede me, anticipate me to some degree, and their provisioning and early effects on me start to form this person that eventually comes to refer to itself as "I." So, the "I" never comes into being except through the support and company of others, living processes, and social institutions on whom the living human creature depends and to which it is necessarily connected. The desires and actions of those others, their ways of handling me or neglecting me, set me in motion, give me form, imprinting and establishing me as one with desires, capable of action, creating a worldly connection, bringing joy and pain, suffering loss, seeking repair. I cannot come into being without being touched, handled, maintained, and I cannot touch or handle or maintain without having first been formed in the crucible of those practices. And yet, when the conditions of touch are lost, so too is a fundamental sense of what sustains us as living creatures whose capacities for receiving and doing are layered together over time.

Because certain conditions of life and living are laid bare by the circulation of the virus, we now have a chance to grasp our relations to the earth and to each other in sustaining ways, to understand ourselves less as separated entities driven by self-interest than as complexly bound together in a living world that requires our collective resolve to struggle against its destruction, the destruction of what bears incalculable value—the ultimate sense of the tragic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is forthcoming as "A Livable Life? An Inhabitable World? Scheler on the Tragic" by Judith Butler, from WHAT WORLD IS THIS? (Columbia University Press, September 30). Copyright © 2022 by Judith Butler. Please note that the contents of this article may vary from the upcoming book chapter version.

REFERENCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. "Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity." Covid-19. Accessed July 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html#footnote02.

"COVID-19 Vaccination Tracker." Reuters. Accessed March 18, 2022. https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/vaccination-rollout-and-access/.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.

Freud, Sigmund. 2011. *Reflection on War and Death*. Translated by Abraham Arden Brill and Alfred Booth Kuttner. Project Gutenberg.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2013 *Truth and Method* Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Bloomsbury.

Gurwitsch, Aron. 1966. *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.

Heidegger, Martin. 1977. "The Age of the World Picture." In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 115-154. Translated by William Livitt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

Landgrebe, Ludwig. 1940. "The World as a Phenomenological Problem." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1 (1): 38-58.

Lugones, María. 1987. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2 (2): 3-19.

Mbembe, Achille. 2019. "Thoughts on the Planetary: An Interview with Achille Mbembe." By Sindre Bangstad and Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen. Illustrated by Anastasya Eliseeva. *New Frame*. https://www.newframe.com/thoughts-on-the-planetary-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. "Eye and Mind." In *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by James M. Edie, 159-190. Translated by Carleton Dallery. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

———. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible.* Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Pradeu, Thomas. 2012. *The Limits of the Self: Immunology and Biological Identity*. Translated by Elizabeth Vitanza. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Prendergast, Christopher, eds. 2004. *Debating World Literature*. London: Verso.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2004. *The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*. Translated by Andrew Brown. London: Routledge Classics.

Scheler, Max. 1919. *Vom Umsturz der Werte: Der Abhandlungen und Aufsätze.* Zweite Durchgesehene Auflage. Leipzig: Der Neue Geist.

Scheler, Max and Bernard Stambler. 1954. "On the Tragic." *CrossCurrents* 4 (2): 178-191.

Rancière, Jacques. 2012. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Bloombury.