

DEATH IS NATURAL, THE PREMATURE DEATH IS NOT: THE ETHICS OF UNTIMELY DEATH

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СМЕРТЬ ЕСТЕСТВЕННА, ПРЕЖДЕВРЕМЕННАЯ СМЕРТЬ – НЕТ: ЭТИКА БЕСКОНЕЧНОЙ СМЕРТИ

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Abstract. The paper does not discuss the biological naturalness of death and lesser this naturalness of the “on time” or untimely death. But the problem of *untimely death*, only occasioned by the present pandemic, is deconstructed starting from its veiling by the ideology of the “inherent” death of the old in the absence of ventilators and intensive care beds. To this ideology, Kant’s theory of *categorical imperative* and Aristotle’s concepts of *potentiality* and *actuality* are counter-posed. In front of the ideology that justifies the differentials of the importance of life – actually, somehow deduced from / related to Heidegger’s theory about death as fundamental source of the meaning of life – the theory about the *contents* of life as source of its meanings, and the logic of *universalizable* values are demonstrated. These universalizable values are clearer during *exceptional* situations. The example is that of a different confinement: the blockade of Leningrad (September 1941-January 1944) shows what kind of stimuli of the human life are *just* human (deployment of reason, questioning of the *telos* of things and especially of the human life) and what the universalizable *teloi* meant for the resistance of inhabitants. The *difference* between the untimely death caused by natural catastrophes and illnesses and, on the other hand, those, *preventable*, generated by social relations, is followed by the analysis of the *inner* criterion of untimely death and the *attitudes* towards untimely deaths and the reduction of life.

Keywords: present pandemic, life, death, telos, categorical imperative, potentiality and actuality, untimely death, universalizable values, preventable death.

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Contents

Instead of introduction: who “deserves to die”

1. Ethics: Kant and the popular wisdom about the persons and the human life as end-in-themselves
2. Heidegger, being-towards-death, the meanings of life and the popular wisdom
3. Methodology to conceive life and death
4. Aristotle, actuality and potentiality
5. The exceptional situations: the example of Leningrad’s blockade and the universalizable values
6. The untimely deaths and their characteristics
7. The inner criterion of untimely death
8. The attitude towards untimely deaths and the reduction of life

Conclusion

Резюме. В статье не обсуждается биологическая естественность смерти и, в меньшей степени, естественность «своевременной» или безвременной смерти. Но проблема преждевременной смерти, вызванная как раз происходящей пандемией, деконструируется, начиная с ее завуалированности идеологией свойственности смерти для стариков, в отсутствие аппаратов искусственной вентиляции легких и коек интенсивной терапии. Этой идеологии противопоставляются кантовская теория категорического императива и аристотелевская концепция потенциальности и актуальности. В противовес идеологии, которая оправдывает различия в важности жизни; и в соотнесении с теорией Хайдеггера о смерти как фундаментальном источнике смысла жизни – демонстрируется теория о содержании жизни как источнике ее значений, включая логику жизненных универсализуемых ценностей. Эти универсальные ценности в большей мере проявляют свою очевидность в исключительных ситуациях. Примером может служить другой вид исторического заточения и изоляции : блокада Ленинграда (сентябрь 1941 г. – январь 1944 г.), раскрывающем значение стимулов человеческой жизни, которые являются чисто человеческими (использование разума, вопрошание предназначения вещей и особенно человеческой жизни); и что универсальные цели означали для сопротивляемости жителей Ленинграда. Различие между безвременной смертью, вызванной природными катастрофами и болезнями; и, с другой стороны, предотвратимой, порожденной социальными отношениями – все это сопровождается анализом внутреннего критерия безвременной смерти и отношения к безвременной смерти и к сокращению жизни.

Ключевые слова: нынешняя пандемия, жизнь, смерть, телос, категорический императив, потенциальная возможность и актуальность, безвременная смерть, универсальные ценности, предотвратимая смерть.

Содержание

Вместо введения: кто «заслуживает смерти»

1. Этика: Кант и народная мудрость о личности и человеческой жизни как о самоцели.
2. Хайдеггер, бытие к смерти, смысл жизни и народная мудрость
3. Методология зачатия жизни и смерти
4. Аристотель, актуальность и потенциальность
5. Исключительные ситуации: пример блокады Ленинграда и универсальные ценности.
6. Безвременные смерти и их характеристики
7. Внутренний критерий безвременной смерти
8. Отношение к безвременной смерти и сокращению жизни.

Заключение

Instead of introduction: who “deserve to die”

As we know, the pandemic has showed interesting aspects of the human attitudes in *exceptional situations*. One was occasioned by the deaths announced by the medical coordination institutions. Most of these deaths belonged to elderly persons and, more or less inevitably, with different, many times plural, illnesses playing the role of co-morbidities.

In front of this fact, the theory that the epidemic was not as extraordinary as the medical officials, politicians and media described it and that there was not at all the need of lockdown that unbalanced, even destroyed the economy (jobs and consumer rating), had a significant audience. The argument of the popularity of the theory was just the low level of deaths – towards the catastrophic foresights made at the beginning and the precautions always officially underlined – and, more, the state of the dead and, obviously, of the candidates to death. “They would have died of their diseases anyway and, when all is said and done, they already have lived”. In this framework, the repeated information about the lack of ventilators necessary to help the seriously ill to breathe, and thus to live, was received as an unpleasant accident but not changing the inevitable “principled” choice of the “more deserving” beneficiaries of ventilators: which, obviously, were not the elderly persons.

We do not discuss here the *psychological* side of the attitudes. It is, certainly, a sign of individual *vulnerability* to consider the deaths of others as less relevant than one’s own death; *and this suggests different experiences, perhaps even traumas, generating the individual vulnerability and the effort to justify the differentials of importance of life.*

1. Ethics: Kant and the popular wisdom about the persons and the human life as end-in-themselves

If *ethics* intervenes, we have more elements to understand different positions about the problem of death. Let’s highlight: it is not about the tragic choice of

physicians between two patients requiring the ventilator that is only one; concretely, the physicians would choose the patient who has more chances to live². But *at the same time and always the physicians have warned* against both the lack/shortage of ventilators – and of individual protective equipment as well as of all the installations necessary in the intensive care units – and the *tragedy that may occur if they are forced to choose between patients*: some lives would be stopped brutally, and *even though the patients would have recovered with appropriate treatment*. “We cannot play God, we cannot choose to not give our full help to patients, and thus we cannot choose to not give them life”.

No, it’s not about the position of physicians and nurses, and the entire medical personnel – who have assumed heroically their difficult task – but about the *theory of the differentiated importance of life and death according to the weaknesses of the human persons or even according to their professional value*.

But *Kant* has given us the basis of the perspective about the human life: *of all*, since he asserted that no one must be treated only as a means but always also as an end; the human *life*, since not the inevitable death is the measure of human beings, but life; the *human life*, since in front of the apparent diversity, the humans are rational beings, have all the faculties necessary to understand and act reasonably developing values as criteria, and thus they are ends-in-themselves, namely each of them is and *must be treated as an end and never as a means only*³.

“Kant has ethicized too much”, may sound a usual objection. But this objection belonged only to those who considered themselves to stand near or in the shadow of the “chosen” leadership of the *world, as if they would have spoken on behalf of this leadership*. However, *in the popular wisdom*, and irrespective of the religious ideologies which have veiled it, the human life was the *most precious given to humans and to every human being*: because it was *only one, unique and unrepeatable life on the Earth and for this reason all the trials to which men are subjected must be spared and defeated, arriving at the better state*. This better state was the situation when the

² **Marcello Ferrada de Noli**, 10 Apr, 2020, translating from the Swedish article *Dokument visar: De prioriteras bort från intensivvård*, 09 apr. 2020, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/samhalle/a/1AyePy/dokument-visar-de-prioriteras-bort-fran-intensivvard>: official instructions “*how to prioritize the selection of patients to be treated in intensive care units are: patients of a biological age 80 or over should not be prioritized. The same regarding people 70-80 years old who have a significant disease in more than one organ system. Neither should people aged 60-70 who have similar failure in more than two organ systems be eligible for intensive care*”; and **Marcello Ferrada de Noli**, 21/05/2020, translating from a Swedish journal (<https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/karolinska-misstanks-prioriterat-bort-njursjuka-covidpatienter/>) a paragraph showing the tragic choice: “*We are concerned about the process of selection for respiratory care among patients with severe Covid-19 infection in the Stockholm region. We have repeatedly found that those patients who are deemed to be in need of respiratory care for a long time (e.g. a couple of weeks) are denied intensive care with the argument that a younger patient with better prognosis may need the place in a few days*”.

But see also the concrete information concerning the same situation in France, in Dr. Badia Benjelloun, 2020.

³ Ana Bazac, 2016.

humans – always heroes – acquired their functions (of loving husband of the desired wife, of happy father, of good organizer or fighter or artisan or farmer, being recognized and sympathized by the other members of their communities) briefly, the happiness of the plenitude of life.

In this respect, *life* and its *plenitude* were the supreme/“saint” values of the popular wisdom. Obviously, the humans were framed within different religious ideologies, as Christianity that has developed the strange ethics of the suffering as the supreme virtue because it was considered a way to Paradise, sign of supreme love of God and supreme communion with God; but the common sense and the vital instinct have always backed the deep belief that life is something different, of different order of things: actually, the basis of all the other facts and values.

2. Heidegger, being-towards-death, the meanings of life and the popular wisdom

Therefore, *life and not death was the measure, criterion of judgements and preoccupation of humans*. Since every living being dies, death was sad but normal, natural. Why then should the human being have been defined as “being-towards-death”? Only for considering the “preparedness to death” as the force and individual state, at the same time, that would be an incentive/the most important incentive to have a more conscious life, perhaps in order to rue the lesser possible? *Heidegger* did not put the problem in this way. We all know why: the Great War has definitely put the shadow of death on the life of Europeans, so as death became (almost) the only sure fact, the only sure criterion to discriminate and understand the transient life, the meaning of life and the *raison d'être* of the human being/of the being as such. To confront one’s own finitude seemed to Heidegger followers as the supreme wisdom, much beyond the trivial human experiences, as the most personal determinant of the individual and his conscience. Yet the attitude of “anxiety” regarded not the inevitability and imminence of death but the being-in-the-world *in general*.

However, because of the *anti-social* stance of Heidegger, and despite of his criticism of metaphysics, the existence of man as being-in-the-world/*Dasein* was outlined in a pale ontology, having the flavour of metaphysics deducing from concepts the order of the world. Anxiety was the dark pendant of “care”, but both disregarded the *contents* of life, the *only one giving meanings to the human being and its existence*. (All of these concepts, remained at their most general suppositions, sketched a too abstract, in fact childish “horoscope” type philosophy: everything can be said under the above concepts lying under the shadow of death. But not the pessimism of this philosophy, that is also historically constituted, is important here).

*The meanings are given by the contents of life*⁴. And since death is the limit, and is normal, are the humans afraid of it or of the *untimely* death? Is the abstract death the incentive and criterion to be responsible during life, or the *concrete human relations and values* which, all of them, regard the life, and not the individual’s not only inevitable but even imminent in his conscience, death?

⁴ Ana Bazac (1).

The criterion of *life* and *contents of life* for the meanings the humans give to everything is emphasised by the position of suicides. Those destroying their own unique life do this because *the contents of their life are no longer bearable for them*. However, in their deep down they know that this should have not happened (because their life should have not deployed in that way), *they have a painful regret of having to be their own killers*. This is the reason of so many unsuccessful suicide attempts.

The popular wisdom is clear-cut about the sanctity or *supreme virtue* of life. The common people know that when they say “I’m so upset that I feel like ending my days” they do not want to end their lives. (When a countrywoman complained “I’m so upset I’d throw myself into the river” and a pre-adolescent child sneered “Why do you not do then? Do it!”, the woman stopped, looking at herself and not only at the child: she could not explain that she spoke metaphorically, nor that the possible suicide would have done irreversible the resumption of life she ardently desired; and she saw what important is to express only the words which do hurt in no way, neither her nor the others).

Those who supported the theory of differentials of importance of life were not followers of Heidegger. Or: not fully followers. One may deduce that anxiety and care are within/structure the contents of life. But, as Heidegger has absolutely eschewed the *contents* of life – as the *time* and *manners* of deaths⁵ – so those people did not consider the *contents* of care and anxiety of the humans who died during the pandemic because they had no the immunity to fight the illness. ‘They were old’. But, asked a participant to the comments occasioned by the (article about) the death of some Dutch choristers after the performance of their chorus just before the official measures to prevent the diffusion of the coronavirus – and, even though only 3 have died, more than 100 have been infected⁶ – “Why should ages matter? Is the death of a 60 year old person less tragic than the death of a 30 year old person?” Yes, was the answer, “it is because the 30 year old has an extra 30 years of life ahead”.

3. Methodology to conceive life and death

It sounds not unreasonably, sounds it? Once more, in front of two patients needing the only ventilator, the physicians would choose the patient who has more chances to live. But the problem is truly different: *to justify, or not, the inhuman conditions leading to the above tragic choice*.

The ethical stances are not abstract, because the ethical problems are not separated from the whole life and all the conditions generating ethical aspects and dilemmas. The analytic philosophy, avoiding the social problems, does practice this type of separation – leading to simplistic dilemmas as the one emphasised by the participant to comments (‘whose death is lesser tragic?’). The insensate position of the

⁵ Ana Bazac, 2014.

⁶ *Concertgebouw chorus...* May 11, 2020: “Some are trying to alert the Dutch public health service (GGD). In particular, they ask that the contaminated choir members be tested. The GGD promises to test six, only one will ultimately have access to the test. Today, the singers criticize the health service for not taking the necessary measures on time”.

participant derives just from judging in an *abstract* way, *extracting the problem of “those whose death is not so tragic” from the social reality*. His reaction to the news about the death of the choristers was not a lament, but a justification.

In the popular wisdom, the death of a young person – and more, of a child – is seen as a big tragedy (for his parents, the biggest tragedy). *But this does not mean that there is no sadness when a 95 year old dies*. All the humans know that death means the annihilation of life: that *was*, and that *belonged to that person... who is not anymore*.

For this reason, the argument-question of the participant, “is the life of a 60 year old covid-19 victim worth more than a 30-year old committing suicide from the desperation the economic fallout of the crisis had on his life?” is put in the same bad/false way of abstracting the dilemma from the *whole of criteria and values of humans*. He did not answer (“it’s complicated”), another participant observing that “If you don’t seem to care much about the vulnerable who are succumbing to this disease, I’m not sure I believe you care much about the isolated younger person with thoughts of self-harm”.

Life is important (“Lives are important, age is irrelevant here”, was the conclusion of the comments) – is the value assumed by the human beings. Then why is now this value debatable? In history, we know that the material conditions of *rarity* and the political conditions to surpass rarity have involved the debasement of the human life. But at least from modernity, the moral conscience has included, near the continuous devaluation, also the worth of the human life. Thus, this worth has been outlined – and still it is – *but* in a contradictory atmosphere of values, worldviews and social relations. Just this contradictory social milieu is the cause of the present justifications of the depreciated life of some ones.

Therefore, the problem is not that it would be unreasonable to assert that it’s “more” sad to see the death of a 30-year old, because he/she did not live the whole life he/she could have lived; but it is *unreasonable to think that the death of an aged person who already lived a big part of his/her life would be “lesser” sad*. And not for the possibility of creation and unique experiences of every life the old person, too, could transpose/could have transposed into actuality, but simply for the principle of the *worth of life: for every human being*.

Death does give nothing to life, of course. The ancient Greek wisdom to not be scared of death because when you think at it death doesn’t exist and when there is death you are no longer (in order to be scared etc.) is clear: *the humans do not live according to the only meaning that the conscience of death gives them, but according to the positive or negative stimuli of life*. Death is only a limit, the signal of nothingness. Life is a *horizons* creator. This is the reason of so many gods describing its facets: forms of existence, faculties allowing existence, characteristics of living humans, goals of living humans, and possible paths; all as possibilities watched by the Genius⁷, later on the Guardian angel of every person.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, 2007, p.10.

4. Aristotle, actuality and potentiality

Aristotle's concepts shed light on the relationship between life and death. *Life is generator of life* (of meanings, facts, experience, existence), and only if it is the rest exists, too. Life is *actuality* that is before everything we can think and judge: because only from life different *potentialities* may appear.

More: *the actuality of life generates different types of potentialities*. The intrauterine life is actuality as life, but is potentiality of the future human: thus, this form of potentiality is anterior to actuality, the future human being. At the same time, the potentiality from the intrauterine life may develop as a full normal human being, but may depart from the normal path, and thus the previous potentiality does not actualize at all or it does but in a weak/bad manner and then we even do not have the (expected) actuality, the normal human being, but something different.

But these different types of potentialities should be carefully judged. When *there is life*, it is no longer important that it is actuality, the generator, thus the previous moment to any potentiality. On the contrary, people *judge* starting from the concrete *precedent* moment to those existent or expected. Potentiality is suggested by the ideas they have about the things they are interested about. But these ideas are not phantasms. We see a child practicing the piano. This is a potential state of what he can arrive: a big piano player. But it's possible the child will not arrive at all, and from very different reasons. Thus, even though the initial state was given, as well as the path (practicing the piano) was, the result cannot be attained. Not every potentiality is fulfilled.

But if so, we have to continue the careful judgement. In front of the situations when the potentialities do not fulfil, we must not adopt a relativistic, cynical stance: "that it, potentiality never fulfils in an ideal/absolute form, so we have to accept the actualities". This reasoning may quiet our conscience, but we don't have to calm down us, but *to discriminate the potentialities and to seek to realise what is valuable in humans*.

And finally: Aristotle's concepts may be used not only for the neutral analysis of different biological and social states, but also for the fine grasp of *values*. People have many values (and types of values, obviously). How do we discriminate between them, since all are both potential and real? *Actuality is that which definitely sends to what is necessary for human beings*. But the concept and meanings of necessity are *socially* outlined. Then, how could we have criteria of that which is necessary without falling under the power of arbitrariness and authoritarianism? These criteria exist, according to Aristotle. They are those resulted from the questioning of the *telos* of things. *Which are the consequences of that which we consider necessary? What is the reason to be of that "necessary" we thought to?* But if these questions can be put only in front of the "really existing" things, because these things are intertwined with other ones and have consequences, we can also *control potentiality*, the states anterior to the existing things. In other words: we can *anticipate* from the present and future/the consequences of the present how to master their potential foregoing moments.

Who can do all of these? Because of historical and social conditions, the humans – who are, in principle, every one of them, knots of potentialities and of fulfilled actuality – had to accept the theory and institutions of decision power concentration.

The ideal was that of the best members of the community – from the standpoint of knowledge and “virtue”, i.e. material means of power – as leaders and having on the top a king. This *hierarchical model of decision power* is taken over also by the present ideology of power concentration. The king – desired by Plato to being a philosopher – is substituted in the present technological optimism by the Artificial Intelligence (AI) that would be an impartial arbitrator over the claims of both “the market and the state”. But this model, concentrating the decision power, precludes the ruled, appearing as in the time of Plato, as a multitude *without face*.

But can we think to the present population as Plato did? During his time, creation and creativity arose from “the best members” of community because the physical and intellectual labour types were absolutely separated. But aren't creativity and concrete creation the result of everyone's freedom of creative manifestation? Don't we have more exceptional results if the exceptions are selected / appear *from a greater number of potentialities*? And does this not mean that the 'subjects' cannot be of the ancient form but *simply equal participants in dialogue and decisions*? The present level of general knowledge is far higher than during Plato's time, with all the efforts of the rulers to lower it. Thus the common people *can participate to debates and decisions*. During the time of Plato/in his ideal model, only the king “knew”, thus he was the leader of decisions. On the other hand, in the AI technological optimism, the AI “knows”, *as if* besides the private investors and the political representatives of the present capitalism the ruled would not exist at all.

As in the analysis of criteria of values, the *telos* appears in the picture of manners/ means/ institutions of decision-making: for, in the last instance, the decisions concern overwhelming consequences in the entire society, life and death consequences.

5. The exceptional situations: the example of Leningrad's blockade and the universalizable values

The concepts of actuality and potentiality are once more relevant when the problem of death and life are put in *exceptional situations*. Let's be clear: the exceptional situations do not create a different logic of life and death than that of the “normal” times, but they only reveal it and, possibly, *accentuates* it. However, the exceptional situations can no longer manage life and death in the usual manner: hence, the importance of the ability of the dominant ideology to lull the conscience of the population, to transform the losses of lives and their infinite creativity into “collateral losses”.

Nowadays, some ones have considered that “it's inevitable” to choose between patients whose death “is not so tragic” and the patients who deserve to be saved. During the blockade of Leningrad (September 1941- January 1944, 900 days), the starvation was so horrible and so long that many people, mothers caring their children, children under their mothers' eyes, elderly persons, adolescents, the few men working in the city administration, have died from dystrophy, each day and minute seeing the approach of their death. The Ales Adamovici and Daniil Granin's *The Blockade Book*,

is a *non-fiction* book, based on/reproducing diaries and oral testimonies⁸. There was even a mother that has sacrificed her little daughter giving a little more food to his older boy who was more resilient thus could have had more chances to survive⁹. There were mothers who saved all their children, even though some ones died after, from their illnesses contracted during the blockade. There were people who saved books, since the books too were burned to soften the terrible winter frost. And all of these in a city that has organised ratios – too small, but just in order to assure to every one – cleaning of streets, defence of museums and scientific institutes, all that could have done to give a little equilibrium to the inhabitants.

All of these human experiences in exceptional situations are narrated by the actual heroes. What does narration mean here: their impressions, their feelings? Not only: strict information about the impact of blockade on the ordinary lives. This impact through impressions suggesting to the participants-victims some meanings of life; this seems to be a *phenomenological* approach: but is it far more than that. The description of the behaviour of people – from selfishness generated by the animal part of the human being that needs to eat in order to exist, but also generated by the internalisation of the privileged social position of the bureaucratic strata, to the purest altruistic attitudes – reveals the deep *causes* of this behaviour. Sometimes the heroes arrive to these causes, sometimes not, and just this position of *rational* (“scientific”, if we use the ancient distinction between *opinion* and *well-founded knowledge*) *judgement*, beyond one’s own feelings, is what is specific to the humans and is challenged in the exceptional situations and becomes a *main criterion of life within exceptional situations*.

On the one hand, the exceptional situations occlude the individual’s path/possibility to arrive at coherent rational judgements concerning the *causes* and *results* of phenomena, beyond the fragments of reality experienced and eventually considered as models. And for this reason it is more possible that people do no longer question the narratives they have about the world. Hunger may transform a decent man into a beast, a traitor, a murderer. However, the majority of the Soviet population, of the population of besieged Leningrad have continued to *question* the arguments and *to answer from the standpoint of altruistic universalizable values*. Why that? Because: they were convinced *rationally*, and always with facts, that *life according to egocentric animal ends is not worth to live*. They knew that some of them will die: and *not for abstract words*, not for slogans urged by leaders, but for their own *life collectively thought*. Namely: behind their effort they knew there was the *dignity of life* that was worth to defend.

But on the other hand, the *intuitions* about the *totality*, resulted from the description of/confrontation with *immediate* individual experiences and feelings, can suggest, in some conditions, *the rational knowledge of the contradictory and moving unitary/total structure of reality*. Thus here it’s about a *constructive position about reality*, and no longer about only its intuition.

⁸ Ales Adamovici and Daniil Granin, 1987.

⁹ Idem, p. 167.

When is this fact possible? It is when the feelings of people have a *universalizable* values basis. The problem of the universalizable/*what can be universalized* was a neglected problem in the human thinking: certainly, many philosophers have considered that their concepts would have had the deepest and truest power of explanation, and that their perspectives – expressed in their worldviews and precise revelation of the Being – are “finally, the only ones which may be generalised as belonging to all the thinking beings”. But the concepts of universal and universalizable are, as all the other, concepts which may and must be analysed. In order to understand what can be universalised, we must precise our *criteria* and, after that, apply them. Or, not many philosophers did that.

So, which would be these criteria? May they be the selfishness generated, here, by hunger? But the *criteria to analyse the humans must concern only them*. Or, hunger and other biological needs to keep the own living being’s balanced state in order to survive do not pertain only to humans. From old, the understanding of the *differentia specifica* of things – and of humans – was a big philosophical problem. And it resulted in the grasping of this specific difference: reason/*logos*/common sense/ability to think and express one’s own thinking that allows efficient action, because the thinking as such *corresponds* to the real, cosmological order of things.

Then how must reason be evolved so as it can develop at the level of the individual and at the level of actions, i.e. of his relationships with other individuals? It must take place in such a way that its power is not dislocated by external to it, natural constraints (as hunger); thus *reason as the specific difference of humans must impose over the natural features of living beings*.

How can this be?

A. *Kant* has showed that the supreme proof of the human rationality is the behaviour towards the other humans who *must be treated always as ends and not only as (mutually) means*. Only this behaviour according to the categorical imperative is *universalizable* at humans, because only this behaviour excludes the existence of “exceptions” of selfishness: if one would generalise, in a *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning, that as an individual is selfish and acquires his/her desired objects so all the individuals can do this, the result would be malign¹⁰, and even for the first individual taken as an example. *Selfishness cannot be a universalizable value for humans because it is not specific to them and thus because it always coexists with the opposed value of altruism*.

How does it coexist? The first answer is that of different proportions of selfishness and altruism: but ultimately, in the simple form of *zero sum* relations.

Nevertheless, reason is not a cold judge measuring all things in a God-like manner. Rather, it *penetrates* in all the human relations, actions, attitudes, behaviours, feelings and thoughts, expectations and stimuli. Clearer: all of these relations, actions, attitudes, behaviours, feelings and thoughts take place through their examination by, if not their subordination to, the questioning of their causes: and consequences. Certainly,

¹⁰ See also Gabriel Hoh Teck Ling, Christina Mee Chyong Ho, May 2020.

to ask the causes is a definite human manifestation of reason. *What, how, why*: but the most human cause and the most human manifestation of reason is the *what for*, the cause of *telos*, putting the *consequences* of the human action under scrutiny¹¹. We might fancy that the reactions of animals, and obviously the superior ones, even patterned in their instincts, are some kinds of responses to the recognition of good or bad elements from their environment: responses to *what* and manifested as responses *how*. We know even the Pavlov type conditioned reactions which are the responses to the succession of events, thus “conjecturing” that the cause of the second event/the *why* would be the first. But the animals do not ask themselves what is the *reason to be* of an action or event. Consequently, *to be concerned with the telos of actions, thoughts, systems of causes and results is specific only to humans*.

B. If so, *the question of telos is another universalizable value of humans*. But we know that people have different *teloi*, i.e. different meanings of their *teloi*. Can we differentiate between them? The first universalizable value – to always consider people as ends and not only as means – is the *criterion* to discern between *teloi*. In other words, Kant’s categorical imperative manifests just *through* the reasons outlined by humans: *these reasons to be are the medium term between the specific of human morality – to consider the others as ends, and not only as means – and the human actions and beliefs*.

The exceptional situations as the blockade of Leningrad are not only the occasions to discriminate between values, the meanings given to *teloi*, but also between those universalizable and those not. The importance of universalizable attitudes was transposed into stimuli of life and calm in front of death. The *individual experiences* (of hunger and cold) give limited and *static* conclusions, though absolutely true. Only when they are exceeded by universalizable values, those static conclusions become integrated within a *dynamic* representation of the world and its exceptional situations. Because these assumed universalizable values *are related /send to other humans*. When the individual assumes universalizable *teloi*, he becomes richer in meanings: which correspond to the contradictions and dynamic of the processes where the individual is immersed. Without the universalizable *teloi*, the historical process and event comprising him seem to be an implacable given; with the universalizable *teloi*, the individual can be a superior force than his environment marked by the event/exceptional situation. The hunger and cold are the same, but the individual can judge the event and mentally reduce it to a frame that changes, will change and will cease to oppose to the universalizable *teloi*: if and when the collaboration of humans under the sign of universalizable *teloi* will reach its zenith. The painful individual experiences are counterbalanced by the collective universalizable *teloi*: the pain of the former, the nadir of the humans, is easier supported – mentally – when there is a collective horizon showing the created zenith through the collective effort.

Without the universalizable *teloi*, the not-fulfilled individual life because of the hunger and imminent death is not marked by awareness: this life is reduced only to individual feelings, the need to eat and to not suffer. *The universalizable values support*

¹¹ Ana Bazac, 2017.

the wake of the human conscience: to criticise the exceptional situation, to refuse it not in the name of possible food if the individual surrenders but just in the name of universalizable *telo*. Between these *telo* and the exceptional situation there is an absolute antagonism: the logic of the exceptional situation, its goal, is to destroy all the universalizable values and human attitudes.

The common people knew that the war was a malign exceptional event aiming at destroying not only their life but also the universalizable *telo* which fortified them. They did not oppose the material face of life to some idealistic, vague, “spiritual” force. On the contrary, they were careful to see the universalizable *telo* strongly related to the everyday peaceful life. The goal of common people was not to become heroes, but only to live a dignified life assuming the universalizable *telo*. Their biggest will was to end the war, not to sanctify it. But, without calling themselves heroes, they were: because they knew that they ought to resist for the survival and victory of universalizable values.

Thus the model of ordinary Soviet people in front of the war of *aggression against their own life* can be used to understand the attitude of the ordinary people everywhere towards malign exceptional events. The will to live of the *common people* – those without which the goods necessary to the life of the ideologists who sanctify the malign events do not exist – is far from the idealist will to live transfiguring some absconded spiritual forces: because the idealist will to live, neglecting the ordinary material needs, while enjoying them copiously, is devoid of the universalizable values. *The will to live of the common people contains these values.*

The Soviet book is only a reminder and warning of so many modern days’ blockades, wars, starvations, deprivations, confinement in secret prisons where no “democratic rights” are enforced – but also in official prisons where these rights means work substituting the “free” strikers¹² – deaths and horrible illnesses and disfigurements. In front of these exceptional situations is it possible to make hierarchies of “not so tragic” and tragic deaths? Did the people bored in isolation and protesting against the lockdown that ‘would have infringed their rights’, also pretending the immediate abolition of all the measures of protection of public health, did they protest against the untimely deaths, infringement of rights, and sufferings caused by contemporary phenomena?

6. The untimely deaths and their characteristics

The peculiarity of exceptional situations is just the *amount* of *untimely deaths*. In all normal times of the modern society – let’s not talk about the entire history, because it complicates the problem of distinction between normal and exceptional course of time – there were and are untimely deaths, but the exceptional situations multiply them even hundreds and thousands of times. Obviously, the untimely deaths may occur because of natural causes as epidemics, diseases, or natural catastrophes. In front of them, people speak sadly about the *bad luck* of their fellows who succumbed. But the

¹² Prison Labor..., May 9, 2020.

majority of modern untimely death was inflicted by the structural relations of this society.

One cannot equate the death provoked by an earthquake with the death brought by war.

Both are untimely and definitely tragic, but death because of war, bombardment, destruction done by humans *does not stand under the sign of bad luck*. It stands under the sign of the *conscious will of people who decided it*, thus under the sign of *murder*.

Death seems to have an unspecified origin: it happens – he was ill or had a car accident – and this impersonal appearance was and is used by those who decide the life and death of the other humans. But death because of war, bombardment, man-made destruction, oppression, deprivation *does not stand under the sign of impersonality*: there are people who are responsible, and the fact that *they have immunity against accountability* leads to a second death of the dead, these ones sink even deeper into the sick layer of evil background of humankind, constituted of both murderers and victims.

The natural death or that caused by an earthquake are clear to those who remain, are well explained by these ones, even when they are not relatives but officials. *Those deaths are not simplified, reduced to abstractions*: on the contrary, each of these deaths appears in its unique complexity, or rather as brutally stopping the unique complex life of the dead. They are deplored. But, in the official narratives, death because of war, bombardment, man-made destruction, oppression, deprivation, methodical assassination *does not stand under the sign of complexity brutally destroyed*: though “our dead” are deplored, they are immediately transformed into heroes, impersonal and abstract – *as if* their destiny would have been just to die for abstract big words covering selfish and irrational dominant class goals – actually, the dead are only numbers, many times not even counted, only possibly transmitted to international institutions, but not popularised¹³ (anyway, the dead enemies are simply external to the information democratically transmitted to the “victorious” population) and thus *the complex lives destroyed by war, bombardment, man-made destruction, oppression, deprivation*¹⁴, methodical assassination, even through long time malign and inhuman physical and spiritual feeding, *do not appear anymore*. One does not like to speak about victims. The dead are murdered once more. The existence leaves the place to nothingness.

As it was shown, the main difference between the untimely death caused by natural phenomena and the untimely death caused by man in the present precise social relations has resulted from the *haphazard accident* that would have been the origin of the first. But even though the patient was ill, *it could have been lived if...* other treatments, drugs, chances would have been implemented or taken place. “It was a bad luck to falling ill etc.” While those who have disappeared due to natural phenomena are once again considered to have “settled” under the sign of bad luck.

But we see a difference between the untimely death caused by natural phenomena and the untimely death caused by man in the present precise social relations. The first

¹³ Gideon Polya, 2007.

¹⁴ Ana Bazac (2), 2018.

was not avoidable with human measures: for this reason, it is laid under the sign of bad luck. As it is known, the *accident* was thought by humans as God's will and some have questioned the human behaviour as the precedence towards the manifestation of this extra-mundane will¹⁵; even the coincidence of the accidental fate of some persons was thought as resulting from this will, while the precedence of the human behaviour was considered as the reason to punish the bad one; and not only by God.

But the opposite of bad luck, an undesired *accident*, is the happenstance that *may be avoided*. As we know, even the death of seriously ill persons may be avoided for a while: but the idea that it is avoidable concerns, obviously, only an interval, "at least a while". Just from this standpoint we can distinguish between *death avoidable for a while* and *avoidable death for potentially long, "infinite" life*. And this second avoidable death was and *is caused nowadays* by the social relations of capitalist domination, exploitation, subjugation, being transformed into permanent Holocausts and Genocides¹⁶. For this reason, the second avoidable death is that called *preventable death*. It ranges from that occurred because of the lack of medicines and vaccines (there are vaccine-preventable-diseases, as polio and measles), of general treatment (as that necessary for tuberculosis or cancers), of prevention programmes (or their cancellation or postponement), to that resulted from malnutrition, lack or shortage of (drinking) water and sanitation, of decent shelter and jobs, therefore of *class inequalities* which, all of them, *accumulate*¹⁷ and produce *together* immediate or late death, just as excruciating and producing the same despair of the survivors.

We cannot ignore that the *race* inequalities – that "more than a third of patients who are critically ill in hospital with the virus, though they are less than 15 percent of the population. In Chicago, African Americans comprise 64 percent of COVID-19 deaths, though they represent 30 percent of the population. Forty percent of deaths from COVID-19 in Michigan have been among African Americans, who make up 14 percent of Michigan's population"¹⁸, clearer¹⁹ – are intertwined with the *class* inequalities: "class and race wars were related, rather than coincidental"²⁰, because capitalism is the "continuity that produces and exploits group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death"²¹.

That group-differentiated vulnerability was "explained" by the official narrative as a kind of genetic susceptibility of the Americans of African descendants²², and never

¹⁵ See Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Re*, 1927.

¹⁶ Gideon Polya, 2019 and 2014.

¹⁷ Jamie Bartram and Sandy Cairncross, 2010; James E. Bennett et al., 2015; Paul D. Loprinzi et al., 2016.

¹⁸ Arun Kundnani, 14 mai 2020.

¹⁹ *Black Americans..*, 20 May 2020; Arline T. Geronimus et al., 2015; Deborah Povich, Brandon Roberts and Mark Mather, 2014-2015; Anne Case and Angus Deaton, 2015; Igor C. Johansen, Roberto Luiz do Carmo & Maria do Carmo D. Bueno, 2013.

²⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 2009, p. 78.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 74.

²² *Trump official blames...* 19 May 2020, quote from the official discourse: "it is a population with significant unhealthy comorbidities that do make many individuals in our communities, in

by the *class* racially accentuated poverty, the lack of the same means of prevention, the working even in the present conditions without these means and the comorbidities determined precisely by poverty (diabetes, obesity): the black American *workers* are poorer than the white American *workers*.

7. The inner criterion of untimely death

But what does untimely death mean? It is the death arriving when the human *still has much to do*, to think, to create, including inter-human relationships. And this potentiality of ideas, experience, feelings and actions remain unrealised. The *potentiality* of humans exists, and *if it is not helped to turn into actuality, the irreparable loss is both of individuals and of society as a whole*.

Aristotle has insisted that, as concepts, neither potentiality nor actuality should be minimized in favor of each other. The destruction of potentiality does not lead to more actuality but, on the contrary, to a depleted actuality. The humankind that loses its members is more vulnerable, and its loss of human persons is *irreversible*. No sophisticated clone of a person is *that* person: because the originary experience of the human person is *unique and unrepeatable*. For Aristotle, to think that “a thing only has potency when it functions, and that when it is not functioning it has no potency”²³ is as false as to say “that that which is incapable of happening *is* or *will be*”. **For:** “that which is not happening will be incapable of happening”²⁴. The destruction of life is the destruction of the actuality of the human persons murdered: they can no longer function, but this doesn’t mean that they could not have been capable to do this if their potentiality would not have been annulled through the murder of the former actuality. In effect, potentiality that did not become actuality has no longer real *topos*, a place/domain of potential appearance. Therefore, the fulfilment of the creative potentiality of every individual is possible only by ensuring the conditions for its actualisation.

8. The attitude towards untimely deaths and the reduction of life

The pandemic was the *occasion* to outline a future permanent “state of exception” (Agamben), motivated with the supra-individual necessity of larva-type lives with work, individual joy of consumption and entertainment, and absolutely devoid of universalizable values. But this type of life is not human, is not humanly “natural”, but a reduction to the animal *genus proximum* of the humans. *The humans having universalizable values fought against the absurdity of untimely death*. But the life reduced to its animal part is just as absurd as death. This life has no future because the humans living this life are forbidden to *project* a future²⁵: they are taught to consider that they have no power in front of the blind forces which would lead the world.

particular African-American, minority communities, particularly at risk here because of significant underlying disease health disparities and disease comorbidities”.

²³ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, 1989, 1046b.

²⁴ Idem, 1047a.

²⁵ Albert Camus, 1948/1999.

This is the atmosphere where some of the humans deprived of universalizable values have considered that “the right to live” belongs to those lesser vulnerable, lesser fragile, but on the contrary, strong and merciless. In their representation, the right to live pertains neither to the vulnerable zones, ill because of the ecological crisis: “those who cannot live will die”. Therefore, in their view there are not untimely deaths: death itself is deprived of specific meanings, it is a quiet and not interesting, uniform grey extinction.

In the best case, the dead are an inherent “natural” sacrifice in an eternal movement of generations; but those who defend loudly the power that transforms the human lives into animal lives consider that they would deserve to live “forever”, for youth means to live forever, without or, later, with artificial means. For them, the value of the human life is only life as such, and consider, that the dead have already made their tasks in life, they deserve to die.

Thus, they once more reduce life and its value to the simple fulfilling of tasks/services. Or, as it was shown, the value of life is not the sum of the values of different, say, professional, tasks. *If the value of life is reduced in this way, life – and especially the life of others – is a simple means: for those who decide over life.* And the death of those who died is a perverse incentive of the life of those who remained: bare life, naked life.

And finally: if the value of life cannot be reduced to that of a means for different tasks, how is felt the value of life by the humans? It is felt as *desire to live*, as “appetite” to live one more experience, one more unique feeling in the inter-human relationships. The desire to live is the deep belief of the human that he/she *still has a lot to do/to feel/to give/to receive*. This is the victory of life over death and this “subjective” criterion is the threshold that forbids any decision to stop the life of others. And this criterion suggests also that when the person no longer want to live – and not because of social problems but only because medical ones –, when the former desire to live has transformed into its absolute opposite, when one’s own life has no longer stimulant meanings, he/she must be helped to die without pain.

The bad behaviours and facts made by a person are not an argument of a hierarchy of values of life. Every normal human being is responsible and is considered by its fellows according to his/her deeds, good or bad. Thus, the human person would have a good professional performance and, hence, value; or, the human person would be a good husband and father, or a bad one, his family regarding him according to the “value” measuring his behaviours. Or, the human person may be a thief and, obviously, must be stopped to continue this path. *But the professional or human or civic value are not tantamount to the value of life*, or their valuing of life. The value of life is beyond any social measurement of concrete achievements, it is the foundation of all measurements and is given by the inner feeling of desire to live.

Conclusion

The humans always choose, as Sartre has explained us. They are responsible for their choice. But concretely, the choice is not a neutral deliberation of the choosing person, but deeply dependent on the *ideological messages* he/she is immersed within,

therefore, on the *power relations structuring the society*, and on his/her *social condition*, meaning also his/her experiences and feelings. Our discussion about the value of life aimed at extracting the ethical arguments from the choices about the value of life. But when we ask why some ones do think that the value of life would depend on age or deeds or behaviour, the ethical arguments are not enough. In our discussion, they are like some *formal* limits or criteria of measuring. The “*contents*” are given just by the *confrontation* between those formal limits – which are not some scholarly findings, because they are felt, “intuited” as a result of all the human experiences, by all the common people – and the ideological messages which fit better to the social condition of the person.

When normal people consider that the value of life may be outstripped by an axiological hierarchy allowing the destruction of life in the name of keeping the social morality, or order, or survival of the fittest, it is because of the *ideological messages which match his/her social condition*; this matching has determined the *internalisation* of some ideological messages and not of other ones. Even though sometimes it would be about a perverse matching and a perverse internalisation: because the *vulnerable* social condition is not helped, but hit, by ideological messages praising the social “cleaning” for a cold but invincible “efficiency”. Then, the reason of the internalisation is the deep *alienation* of these people: they do not understand and, in fact, oppose the economic and political organisation of society, but they do not know how to oppose; and they need in their deep down a stimulating reason of their subjugated condition: when their life cannot evolve in predictable decent frames and the random appearance of pressures is praised by all the official teachings, they must enjoy at least for they are not officially, “scientifically” and “inherently” destined to the imminent death. Therefore, those destined to this death would be the “criterion” of their position that “is not yet fully defeated”.

The ethical explanation of the paper suggests that people who think in that way have a kind of “axiological disease”. But this type of disease, the deep estrangement towards the ethical judgements and values, is a *social* disease, concretely, a disease of, not simply civilisation²⁶, but *capitalist civilisation*. Accordingly, this disease *cannot be defeated only with ethics, but always with social analysis and action*.

People arrive to be convinced that life – and *decent* life, *allowing fulfilment of potentiality, of creativity* – is/are “saint”, and moreover, that *untimely deaths are intolerable*, when they face more than the official ideological messages and when they experiment that these official messages are wrong. If we want the ethical debates to become internal to the everyday trepidation of reasonable animals, *they must be intertwined with social analysis and action*. The ethical definition of the untimely death shows *how close ethics and social transformation are*, and how this social transformation is once more substantiated with the help of apparently abstract reasoning on life.

²⁶ Konstantin S. Khroutski, 2002.

As we know, ethics was deviated in the last decades from its reason to be, the *substantiation of ethical norms* and the *analysis of these ones*, to simple legitimising of the status quo by opposing the individual to society: the insistence of “ethical” solutions to abstract problems devoid of any social milieu, the focus on individual sexual identity and individual political and sexual rights are the proof of this reduction of ethical concepts, norms and reasoning. The “best society” became that assuring those identity and rights: *of some ones and on the expense of other ones*. However, the ethical analysis of the untimely death – much beyond religion that does not link the sanctity of life to the *untimely* death – breaks up the logic of this legitimating ethics. As *Kant’s* theory of categorical imperative became, in the last instance, the ethical basis of the communist theory of the transformation of capitalism, as the theory of untimely death may complete *Kant’s* theory and thus be an essential ethical argument for the present definite, life and death *necessity of the transformation of capitalism*.

In front of the ethical problem of untimely death, it is easier to reverse the capitalist *fragmented* and *isolated* manner to treat the consequences of policies and decisions. Usually and except warfare, the untimely death do not happen immediately after the decisions. Consequently, the decision-makers may develop a huge propaganda negating the interdependence between those policies and the untimely deaths; actually, no capitalist magnate or guru puts the problem of untimely deaths when the purpose of all the capitalist decision-makers is only to *use* people – to treat them only as means – in order to gain profit, more decision power. Ethics may reverse this situation: it shows that just the problem of untimely deaths is that which differentiates between policies, and between ideologies.

This ethics supports the attitude to judge the direct and indirect policy-makers from the viewpoint of their responsibility to having contributed, or not, to the untimely deaths of people from their one’s own or other nations. But this ethics is more than a punitive tool: it shows *which relations must be transformed in order to no longer repeat the untimely deaths*.

Therefore, instead of criticising the policy-makers who have led to the reduction and impoverishment of public health institutions – and radically changing, first mentally, the *causes* of that situation – people who considered that it is normal to choose which patient will have right to a ventilator *have followed just those policy-makers’ path*: “if this is the situation, then we must choose and, actually, it’s normal”. Justification of the status quo is not a simple assertion from the history of political and economic ideas: it prolongs as legitimating the most horrible ideas, those justifying the untimely deaths.

Finally, here it’s not about a partisanship for the elderly. On the contrary: the problem of ages – and of old ages, too – is a problem of *class* and *structural relations*. For sure, the reverse is not correct: there is no difference between the strategies of a young or of an old-aged CEO when both want to maximise the value of shares for their shareholders and for them. But when we see that a high death rate took place in nursing homes in the US and Europe – and not “inevitably” because of the weak immune system of elderly persons – we have to question the *conditions* of these nursing homes,

either private, running for profit, either public and with budget cuts²⁷. And at the same time, we have to understand that *the capitalist treatment of all the ages is equally bad*: the situation of Africa where most of population is young requires a different approach of the epidemic than the Western Europe where the percentage of old persons is significant²⁸, but all the approaches have in front of them not isolated challenges and policies, but the *whole logic of capitalist civilisation*.

Caring for the health of the world, the masters of the present social order are obstinate to keep the logic that generates everywhere cohorts of untimely deaths²⁹. They envisage the reopening of the *same* economy, with absurd calls to consume, ever more, destroying nature, resources and people, with the same and increasing armament costs, preserving the *same* inequalities and producing the *same* increase of preventable deaths, despite the fact that *as these deaths are preventable so the inequalities at their basis are preventable*³⁰. The continuous huge advertising – of drugs, mostly unhealthy food, clothes and cell phones transmitting the ephemeral – has as a result, as before, unhealthy humans whose apparent happiness would be the consumption of the advertised products. The “back-to-work”, without³¹ or eventually with protective equipments and measures, is necessary to the masters of the world: without continuing the *same* economy, with the same “growth”, they will not exist. But the consumerist economy – based on *exchange value* and not on use value – reduces the humans to consumers, thus *the universal values to animal like behaviour*. In front of the capitalist consumption, even life and death were and are perverted: the most efficient life – and the most significant contents of life – is in this model when the humans consume, and thus, the untimely deaths are only re-balancing happenstances against the “excessive” spending of capitalist governments on “un-necessary” American and European elderly, and youngsters from Africa; or on “too many humans”, even white and not old³², who rather die of overdoses of drugs, than imposing work, benefits and a dignified human life³³.

²⁷ *Socialism and...* May 16, 2020; *US nursing homes*. 27 April 2020.

²⁸ Armand Gauz, 17 avril 2020.

²⁹ Dr. Pascal Sacré, May 21, 2020.

³⁰ *Manuel pour...* Conseil de l'Europe.

³¹ *Survey finds...*, 20 may 2020.

³² *Increases in Drug and Opioid...* **January 1, 2016**: “The rate of drug overdose deaths increased significantly for both sexes, persons aged 25–44 years and ≥ 55 years, non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks, and in the Northeastern, Midwestern, and Southern regions of the United States”.

³³ The fact that in the present pandemic the death of black people is higher than that of whites is, once more, not because of a genetic predisposition of some races to the virus (this genetic predisposition was not yet certified by medical researches), but because the black *workers* are *poorer* than the white *workers*. See also Office for National Statistics (UK)... The fact that in the opioid crisis the proportion of young and middle-aged white workers is higher shows the class character of the untimely deaths. See also *Hundreds of Mexican...* 19 May 2020; or *Poor New York City Neighborhoods.*, May 19, 2020. And that neither the problem of pandemic nor that of the opioid epidemic – it was called epidemic – can be solved separately from the general economic and social organisation of the world. Because they involve corporate and private interests to over-diagnosing, over-prescribing and over-using the drugs (Dr. Gary G. Kohl,

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2016); *Opioid Overdose Crisis*, Revised January 2019; The fragmentary approach is illustrated with the concern for legal measures (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction: two thirds of the offers on darknet markets are drug-related). But, with all the legal measures, the use of drugs is high and did not decrease significantly.

Therefore, and only from the standpoint of the pandemic, the principles highlighted by the South Centre (“**Message from the South Centre to the 73rd World Health Assembly**”, *Southnews*, No. 321, 18 May 2020) are that all health products should be considered *global public goods* and absolutely affordable.

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