

# Questions on the Present State of the World

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**ABSTRACT:** Philosophy cannot alone change the present state of the world, the role of the philosopher being only to question and help to arouse a true awareness of what is happening in the world. The current pandemic should therefore incite the philosophers to make the Europeanization of the planet their main question.

**KEY WORDS:** questioning, freedom, individualism, cultural industry, cult of speed, living present, mortality, planetary thought

One can wonder if philosophy and philosophers can really play a role in the period we are living in at the moment, when the pandemic has been raging for several months on the entire planet. In the interview he gave to *Der Spiegel* in 1966, Heidegger said, in my view rightly, that “philosophy will not be able to produce an immediate effect which changes the present state of the world.” Today, and especially in France, the philosopher is considered an expert who is asked to make final judgments on all current issues. We have totally forgotten that the philosopher as understood by Plato, who coined the term *philosophia*, is the one who asks questions, and not, unlike the sophists, the one who dispenses knowledge. The very first philosopher, Socrates, walked the streets of Athens and questioned everyone he met, without getting paid for it, and a few decades later, Diogenes the Cynic became famous for his frugality and disregard for powerful people. Today those who call themselves “philosophers” are in reality “professors” of philosophy and academics, and as such they belong to the very small class of the “well off,” which should make them aware that they can hardly put themselves in the shoes of the great majority of human beings and are therefore not in a position to make final judgments in their place.

What the “philosopher” can therefore only do today is participate in the awakening of consciousness by continuing to do what is within his or her competence, namely questioning, questioning relentlessly, but without making people believe that he or she has solutions. This is well understood in the Indian tradition of thought, where it is not a question of “love of wisdom and knowledge,” but of “seeing” (*darsana*) and awakening (*bodhi*) to the truth. To take into account what is happening in the world, it is indeed necessary to distance oneself from daily concerns by means of meditation (*dhyâna*), a word that must be taken in another sense than that given to it, in the West, by these great philosophers, Descartes and Husserl, because it implies making a void in oneself, and not indulging in this abstract intellectual activity which is generally considered to be the prerogative of the Western philosopher, often placed on the same plane as the scientist.

It is therefore not peremptory positions on current events that should be expected of the philosopher, but rather an in-depth reflection on what characterizes the present state of humanity. It cannot by itself *arouse*, but only *accompany* and *promote* the awareness which has been the result, not certainly among everyone, but in a not insignificant part of the world population, of confinement. Because this “confinement,” against which, at least in France, some intellectuals and philosophers have protested, on the pretext that it infringed on “individual freedoms,” is not a solely negative experience, far from it. Because its first virtue is to temporarily put in abeyance this limitless overexploitation of the planet’s natural resources which is rampant today on all continents and which is the major cause of the ecological disaster which threatens us in a close future. We know that the greenhouse effect and pollution have been significantly reduced in several regions of the world and that human beings being confined, animal species have been able to take advantage of the space thus left vacant, so that confinement has been a welcome respite for them, even though biodiversity is now in danger in virtually all regions of the globe.

But if humans have seen their freedom of movement reduced in this way, confinement has nevertheless offered them the possibility of gaining access to another form of freedom, that of establishing a more authentic relationship to oneself and to the world. Yet the currently raging pandemic strongly calls globalization into question. It could be the occasion for the philosophers to reread a seminal work, which dates from the 1960s, *The One-Dimensional Man*, by Herbert Marcuse, a former student of Heidegger, who later became American. In this book he criticizes the reduction of our humanity to a single reference (“*the one-dimensional*”) produced by liberal industry, that of the consumer and standardized lifestyles. The industrial revolution that marked the beginning of modern times in Europe made the majority of human beings slaves to wage labor, of which, moreover, “professional” philosophers are also part today. It is at the origin of the development in the twentieth century of advertising, creator of superfluous needs and the

overconsumption they generate, and therefore of what the anthropologist David Graeber has called aptly *bullshit jobs*, the present condition of many workers and employees in Western societies who carry out unnecessary and sometimes even harmful activity. It is what he calls the “spiritual violence” that the employees undergo, of which some of them became aware during the confinement, thus realizing the uselessness, even the harmfulness of their work. However, it is because, in our developed societies, work has thus become an end in itself, disconnected from its social purpose, that it has been necessary, in turn, to develop what Adorno and Horkheimer have rightly called a “cultural industry.” This is how our civilization has promoted mass tourism, the folklorization of cultures, and standardized forms of entertainment. In this civilization of leisure, everyone thinks they are free to make their own choices, whereas in reality there is what the French philosopher Dominique Lecourt, a former pupil of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, has so aptly called a “mass individualism,” which is the consequence of the “tyranny of the market” and of the stereotypical individual behavior that results from it.

However, it is precisely this civilization of leisure with its mass tourism that is currently the object of questioning. As is the cult of speed, which the French town planner Paul Virilio already diagnosed in the 1970s. He explained in fact that the proliferation of communication technologies led to a reduction of space and time, to a standardization of opinions and to what he called a “shrinking of the world.” It is indeed the increase in the speed of information that has profoundly transformed the use we make today of language, which has become a simple instrument of communication, so that it no longer fulfills its fundamental role, which is the expression of thought and dialogue. In this regard, confinement may be playing a beneficial role, many individuals being forced to transform their way of being. Because it has meant for some of them to live in the most complete solitude and to experience there the length of time, thus returning to an experience of temporality that is not the jerky and precipitous temporality that is ours today, and allowing them to truly live in the present. Because the present is not only this evanescent limit between what is no more and what is not yet, but this essential dimension that holds in itself all the past and anticipates all the future. This is what Husserl, this thinker of time, has rightly called the “*living present*” to distinguish it from a “*dead*” present which would be reduced to this atom that is the instant abstractly cut out on the line of time. To live fully in the moment is to open up to the situation one occupies in the world and to take it resolutely in charge, as also underscored by this other great thinker of time, Heidegger. And this is also what is taught by this thought of impermanence (*anytia*) that is Buddhism, for which it is a question of making, by this effort of concentration which is meditation, the experience of our total identity with time.

The confinement could thus lead to questioning individualism, which constitutes the fundamental characteristic of Western society, wherein the values of

autonomy and particular interest dominate, as opposed to traditional societies for which the individual is not separable from the group to which it belongs. That *Dasein*, the existent, is from the outset a *Mitsein*, a being with others, as Heidegger strongly emphasized, is what confinement has made it possible to rediscover, because it has been marked by a renewal of solidarity and mutual aid. Thus, most of our contemporaries understand that confinement, but also wearing a mask and practicing distancing gestures, is aimed as much at the protection of others as it is about personal protection. This is also what has led to a reassessment and rehabilitation of those trades usually considered to be of secondary interest, those service trades from hospital staff to home helpers and garbage collectors, without which no human society could subsist.

What our contemporaries are trying to escape by the cult of speed in all its forms and standardized entertainment, is this deep concern that should be ours, that of taking charge of our finitude and our mortality, contrary to what is advocated today by this ideology of transhumanism that has been developed in Silicon Valley, which aims at the unlimited improvement of the physical and mental faculties of the human being by the use of the most recent scientific and technical discoveries and which therefore claims to be able to free humanity from its biological limits. It is therefore nothing less than “the death of death,” the title of the book written by a French surgeon and essayist, Laurent Alexandre, who proposes this will occur in the near future, elevating human beings to the very level of God. But today the specter of death resurfaces with force. Everyone is afraid of contamination, so that in a society where everything is done not to think about death, it is now coming back to consciousness. The pandemic reminds us of our basic mortality. What we are all going through right now should therefore inspire us to truly become what we are, not just those rational animals who have hitherto believed themselves capable of becoming masters of the planet, but mortals. Heidegger, this philosopher who said that the human being is essentially a being “for” death, that is to say destined to die, called upon human beings to *become* thereby mortals, which implies ceasing to give in to the illusions of immortality and come to truly inhabit and take care of the Earth. That would mean not only to face death in thought and to look it in the face, but to see in it not an imperfection, but on the contrary the very foundation of human existence. It is from there that it could then be revealed to us that the anguish of death is in no way incompatible with the joy of existing.

What is thus being deeply questioned is what the great French thinker of Greek origin, Kostas Axelos, called in the 1960s “planetary thought,” a thought resulting from the expansion that Europe has known since the sixteenth century, thanks to its technological development that it was able to impose by colonization on the entire planet. Shouldn’t the current pandemic finally force philosophy to make this Europeanization of the planet its main question? Thus, the pandemic

should be considered as giving a lesson of humility to the Western philosophers, since Hegel's famous phrase remains true: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."

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