

# “A Question” By Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup>

“For the city, the plague marked the beginning of the corruption. . . . No one was disposed any longer to stay on the road that he had previously judged to be the best, because he believed that perhaps he would die before getting there.”  
Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, II, 53.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to share with whomever has the desire to join the discussion a question upon which, for more than a month now, I haven't stopped reflecting.<sup>3</sup> How can it happen that an entire country,<sup>4</sup> without realizing it, collapses ethically and politically because it has been confronted with a disease? Each of the words I have chosen to formulate this question has been carefully considered. Measuring the extent of the abdication of our ethical and political principles is indeed very simple: it is a question of asking oneself about the limit beyond which we are not disposed to abandon them. I believe that the reader who will take the trouble to consider the following points cannot but agree – without realizing it or feigning not to realize it – that the threshold that separates humanity from barbarity has been crossed.

(1) The first point, perhaps the most serious one, concerns the bodies of the people who have died. How have we been able to accept, solely in the name of the *risk* that it hasn't been possible to clearly identify, that the people who are dear to us and human beings in general not

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “*Una domanda*,” dated 13 April 2020 and first published by *Quodlibet*: <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda>. Translated into French by Florence Balique and published on 20 April 2020 by *Lundi Matin*: <https://lundi.am/Une-question>. Translated from the French version, using the Italian original as a guide, by NOT BORED! on 23 April 2020. All footnotes by the French-to-English translator, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> In point of fact, Book II, Section 53 of Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, contains no such passage. Indeed, no version of the book that I have consulted – English, French or Italian – contains it. A Google search for the phrases that Agamben attributes to Thucydides in the original Italian only results in links to his own text, and none to Thucydides book, properly speaking, or, for that matter, any other book. Not one of the people who have presented either the Italian original or translations of it into French, English, Spanish, etc., has noticed this obvious mistake. *None of this bodes well*.

<sup>3</sup> Agamben's reflections on the coronavirus began with “*L'invenzione di un'epidemia*,” published in *Quodlibet*, 26 February 2020. Translated into English as “The Invention of an Epidemic” (no translator indicated), it refers to “an alleged epidemic of coronavirus,” claims that the epidemic is an “invention” (a fiction), and states that the virus is “something not too different from the normal flus that affect us every year.”

<sup>4</sup> That would be Italy.

only die alone – which is something that has never happened before in history, from Antigone<sup>5</sup> to the present day – but also that their bodies are burned without funerals?

(2) We have then also accepted, without it posing too many problems, solely in the name of the *risk* that it hasn't been possible to clearly identify, to limit – to an extent that has never happened before in the history of this country, not even during two World Wars, when the curfews were limited to certain times of day – our freedom of movement. As a consequence of this, we have accepted, solely in the name of the *risk* that it hasn't been possible to clearly identify, effectively suspending our bonds of friendship and love because our fellow human beings [*notre prochain*] have become a *possible* source of contagion.

(3) This has been able to happen – and here we touch upon the roots of the phenomenon – because we have divided the unity of our vital experience, which is always inseparably corporeal and spiritual, into a purely biologic entity, on the one hand, and an emotional and cultural life, on the other. Ivan Illich<sup>6</sup> has shown, and David Crowley has recently recalled here [in *Quodlibet*],<sup>7</sup> the responsibilities of modern medicine in this scission, which is taken for granted and which is, nevertheless, the greatest abstraction. I know very well that this abstraction has been realized by modern science with the techniques [*dispositifs*] of reanimation, which can maintain a body in the pure state of vegetative life.

But if this condition extends beyond the spatial and temporal frontiers that are proper to it, as one seeks to do today, and becomes a kind of [general] principle of social comportment, we will fall into endless contradictions.

I know that someone will hasten to respond that this is a question of a temporary condition, that, once it is over, everything will return to what it had been. It is truly strange that someone could repeat this in good faith at the very moment that the same authorities that have proclaimed that this is an emergency haven't stopped telling us that, when the emergency has passed, it will be necessary to continue to observe the same directives and that “social distancing” (as one has called it in accordance with a significant euphemism) will be the new principle of society's organization. In any case, that which we have agreed to be subjected to, in good faith or in bad faith, will not be [easily] effaced.

At this precise point, because I have made accusations about the responsibility of each one of us in this affair, I can't fail to mention the even more serious responsibilities of those who have had the duty to look after the dignity of men and women. Above all, the Church, which, by making itself the servant of science,<sup>8</sup> which has become the religion of our time, has radically renounced its most essential principles. Under a Pope who calls himself Francis, the Church has forgotten that Francis [of Assisi] kissed lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that one must be disposed to sacrifice one's life rather than one's faith and that renouncing one's fellow beings is renouncing one's

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<sup>5</sup> An allusion to the protagonist of Sophocles' famous play, *Antigone*, in which she tries to secure a proper burial for her brother, Polynices, who has been killed by his brother. King Creon had decreed that Polynices' body not be buried and that his death should not be mourned.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Illich (1926-2002), a Croatian-Austrian philosopher, critic and Roman Catholic priest.

<sup>7</sup> Footnote by *Lundi Matin*: online here: <https://www.quodlibet.it/david-cayley-questions-about-the-current-pandemic-from-the-point> [Translator: note: this text is in English.]

<sup>8</sup> Maybe the Catholic Church in places like Italy, but not at Protestant churches in places like America, where the denial of scientific findings, especially those concerning climate change, has become routine and all-too-commonplace.

faith. Another category that has failed its duties is that of the jurists. We have long gotten used to the reckless use of emergency decrees by which, in effect, the executive power has substituted itself for the legislative one, abolishing the separation of powers that characterizes democracy. But in the present case, all limits have been surpassed, and one has the impression that words of the [Italian] Prime Minister and the Head of Civilian Protection<sup>9</sup> immediately have, as one used to say about the words of the Führer, the force of law. And yet one doesn't see how, once the temporal limits of the emergency decrees have passed, the limitations on freedom can be kept in place, as has been announced. With which judicial measures? With a permanent state of exception? It is the duty of the jurists to verify how the rules of the Constitution are respected, but they are keeping their mouths shut. *Quare silete iuristae in munere vestro?*<sup>10</sup>

I know that there will inevitably be someone who will respond to me that, even if the sacrifice is great, it will have been made in the name of moral principles. To such a person, I would like to recall that Eichmann, apparently in good faith, never tired of repeating that he did what he'd done because of his conscience, in obedience to what he believed were the precepts of the Kantian categorical imperative.<sup>11</sup> A law that affirms that it is necessary to renounce what's good in order to save what is good is as completely false and contradictory as the law that, in order to protect liberty, forces one to renounce it.

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<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Conte and Fabrizio Curcio, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> "Why are the jurists silent about what concerns them?" Latin in original.

<sup>11</sup> Adolph Eichmann, head of the *Schutzstaffel* (the "SS"), on trial for crimes against humanity, in Israel, circa 1961.