

Retrieving Agamben's Questions

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There is tremendous disquiet all around — enough for a lifetime and a half, lived and unlived. But in this time of crisis, scholars otherwise keen to pick through Heidegger's Nazi enabling complicity, attuned to what he said or wrote — or failed to say or failed to write — find themselves repeating currently standard government edicts.

We declare that we need more restrictions on personal freedom, not liberty. Longer isolation, not community. In these times of what can only be described as mass hysteria, Giorgio Agamben undertook to public demurral.

Here I take my point of departure from his original essay posted in Italian, on the 26th of February, [*L'invenzione di un'epidemia*](#), translated into [French](#), [German](#), etc., and then available to be read in English translation online with a number of other posts by other scholars arraigned beneath an excerpt on the plague from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in an issue/post of [*The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*](#) under the title of "The Invention of an Epidemic." Agamben's subsequent clarifying reflections, [*Chiarimenti*](#), published on March 17th (in English as "[Clarifications](#)") detail responses to criticism of his comments on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Agamben had unpacked ('The Invention of an Epidemic') and had then unpacked his unpacking ('Clarifications'), a careful hermeneut, a thinker of the first order, using official data, official reports, official argumentation a question: given the projected severity of the epidemic, were the measures proposed justified? Agamben's reflections, as he clarified them in his blog *Quodlibet*, [*Chiarimenti*](#), observed:

"The dead — our dead — do not have a right to a funeral and it is not clear what will happen to the bodies of our loved ones. Our neighbor has been cancelled and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society that has no value other than survival?"

Things only got worse: the predictions, the responses, the hysteria.

Articles swiftly appeared by scholars emboldened to take him down. The technical term for the practice is 'scientific mobbing.' It can be helpful to think about the concept of "academic mobbing," as explored in discussion by Noah Carl published online in [*The Economist's Open Future*](#).

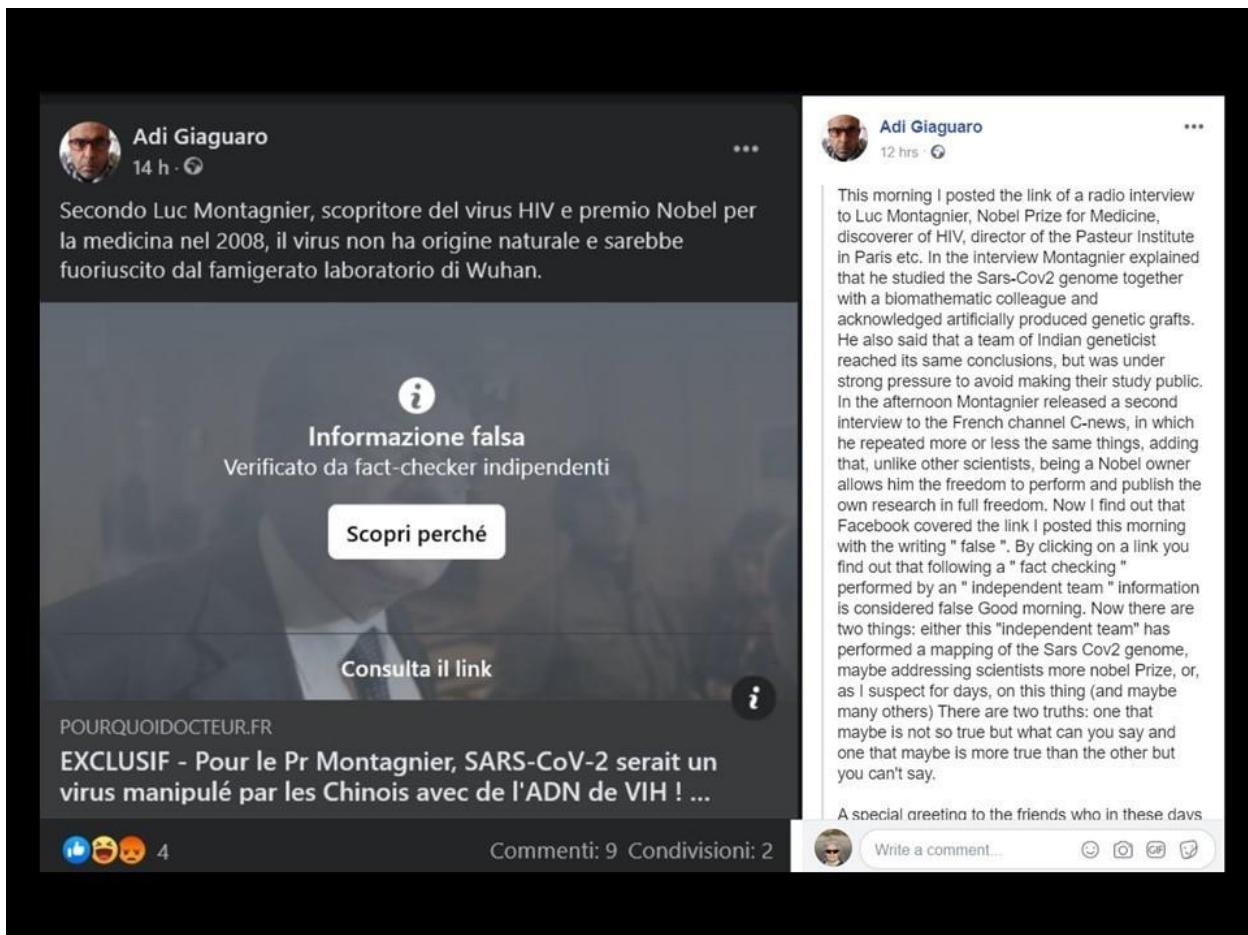
For a discussion of mobbing from the perspective of continental philosophy of science, see my preprint (an eternal preprint as I was asked to write this and as quickly disinvited), "[On The Poetry and Music of Science. Whose poetry? Whose music?](#)"

In Agamben's case, the 'mobbing' was served up as Agamben wrote contra the standard line: challenging the official position. Those who attacked him rarely cared to note that Agamben had only pointed to inconsistencies in the measures consequent to the official position.

No small part of the problem is the idealization of an ideal science imagined as the direct substitute for the word of God. One may not raise a question as epidemiologist, virologist, biochemist, medical doctor, public health expert; one may only repeat the official story. And if one mentions air pollution, including chem trails and their particulate wake, much less bioweapons, certainly not 5G, and so on, one is subject to the same assault, more summary to be sure.

I shared [a series of links on Facebook](#) to illustrate some of the challenges of etiology in general and virus infection in particular, including public health, environmental preconditions for aerial/aerosol transmission, masks, etc. Most recently Facebook flagged an April 16, 2020 YouTube announcement by the Nobel prize winning scientist, Luc Montagnier (who discovered the HIV virus) and who pointed out, not solely citing his own work but the work of others as well, that the new "coronavirus SARS-CoV-2" virus had the unmistakable markers of laboratory production not natural mutation, as 'fact' checked, verified as 'false' news.

Flagged by Facebook and since censored by YouTube, I have a screenshot:



Perhaps one may someday argue that in Agamben's case the range of attacks worked to 'elevate the tone,' as Derrida might have intimated, three hours into a lecture, just where such lectures — any lectures at all, the very idea of public space as such, the concept of being together with others — are quickly acquiring the romantic status of the 'olden days' in memory and subject today, even if mentioned, to sanction whether by moralizing passersby, neighbors, or police, often with grievous consequences, in 'real life.'

In any case, on Easter Monday, the 13th of April, Agamben posted in the same locus, *Quodlibet*, his [Domanda](#). Again translated by Adam Kotsko, this was posted two days later as [Giorgio Agamben: A Question](#).

Social media works by posting and reposting — 'Facebook Poker' as I speak of this in [The Hallelujah Effect](#) — and when I shared Agamben's posts on Facebook I was horrified by the angry response of so-named (this is a Facebook rubric) "friends." Still, I shared other things: videos by virologists, epidemiologists, general medical practitioners. And I made observations of my own on other topics, gingerly.

Perturbed by the force of critical reaction, I nonetheless again posted Agamben's Easter Monday post, unpacking it for anyone who might care to follow the thread just because (the carceral term is significant) "lockdown" gives us all the time in the world to read and not less because "lockdown" robs us of focus at the same time.

I started by noting the most difficult part, the part one can read first of all as if it might have been the point of it all: the closing paragraph:

"I know that someone will hasten to respond that we are dealing with a condition that is limited in time, after which everything will return to how it was. It is truly strange that we could repeat this other than in bad faith, since the same authorities that proclaimed the emergency never stop reminding us that when the emergency has been overcome, we will have to continue to observe the same directives and that "social distancing," as it has been called with a significant euphemism, will be society's new organizing principle. And, in every case, what we have accepted submitting to, in good or bad faith, cannot be cancelled."

— Giorgio Agamben

To understand this as terminus *a quo* requires a return to the point of departure.

Thus we can repeat Agamben's questions, there are three, one by one. The first is crucial:

"1. The first point, perhaps the most serious, concerns the bodies of dead persons. How could we have accepted, solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify, that persons who are dear to us and human beings in general should not only die alone, but — something that had never happened before in history, from Antigone to today — that their cadavers should be burned without a funeral [*che i loro cadaveri fossero bruciati senza un funerale?*]?"

— Giorgio Agamben

Here the issue although directed to the prohibition against visiting the sick and the dying, was critical and classic, concerning the bodies of dead persons: What do we owe the dead?

Throughout, Agamben's point is that we are not living under fascism: despite the language of 'burning' this is no Holocaust nor are we living under a Nazi regime, and, although much of the language encountered on social media is that of war, we are not at war. Much rather, as Agamben writes in his "Clarifications," "We live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called 'reasons of security' and has therefore condemned itself to live in a perennial state of fear and insecurity." To this extent it is unsurprising

"that for the virus one speaks of war. The emergency measures obligate us in fact to life in conditions of curfew. But a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us."

The war motif recurs in Agamben's "Question," outlined as part of the second question Agamben lists:

"We then accepted without too many problems, solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify, limiting, to an extent that had never happened before in the history of the country, not even during the Second World War (the curfew during the war was limited to certain hours), our freedom of movement. We consequently accepted, solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify, *de facto* suspending our relationships of friendship and love, because our proximity had become a possible source of contagion."

Note the repetition: Agamben writes with the care of a poet, repeating, for a total of three times, the register of contingent chance, of possibility and the precision of imprecision despite the absence of certainty: "*solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify* [emphasis added]."

The mantra is key.

What is suspended on the basis of this "risk" that is "not possible" to assess with certainty (the failures of past projections, [as the UK journalist Rob Lyons has reported](#), show the limitations of disease forecasting), is friendship and love, nearness, proximity, excluded utterly to avoid contagion. Freedom of movement is relinquished, affection foresworn and thus, and immediately, we harden ourselves to our loneliness and to that of others.

The third point took Agamben to recall a crucial issue concerning what is at stake in the current treatment of Covid-19 victims, which involves a separation from anything but bare life: most of those who are placed on those ventilators in such high demand, at such high prices, as standard mainstream medical media will inform us, die very much owing to iatrogenic injury: ventilators destroy lung function and even patients who recover suffer lasting lung damage as a result, that is, *should* these patients survive the violence of the ventilator intervention.

Thus Ivan Illich wrote of what he described as "[Guarding the Eye in the Age of the Show](#)" in part against the corruption of our sensibilities via propaganda — Illich did not call Jacques Ellul

‘[Master Jacques](#)’ for nothing — but also in terms of “ethical iconology,” contra the sham of life offered by modern medicine which Illich described in his *Medical Nemesis*, as the ‘expropriation’ of health and life and death (for discussion in the context of technologized medicine, see my article, subtitled ‘[On the Expropriation of Death](#),’ originally a keynote for an *International Nursing Philosophy Conference*, [video reprise here](#)), characterized by Agamben as the “greatest of abstractions” in a surreal but precise expression:

“I know very well that this abstraction was actualized in modern science through apparatuses of reanimation, which can maintain a body in a state of pure vegetative life. But if this condition is extended beyond the spatial and temporal confines that are proper to it, as we are today seeking to do, and it becomes a sort of principle of social behavior, we fall into contradictions from which there is no way out.”

— Giorgio Agamben

After these three points, Agamben goes on to indict both the church and the law, fit for a political theology, and not less, [so I have argued](#), via the philosophy of science, just in order to raise the question of science as a question quite as Nietzsche says and not less as Heidegger says, echoing Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal, when Heidegger, speaking of modern science and modern technology, reminds us that

“Science *is* the new religion.”

Agamben writes

“...The Church above all, which, in making itself the handmaid of science, which has now become the true religion of our time, has radically repudiated its most essential principles. The Church, under a Pope who calls himself Francis, has forgotten that Francis embraced lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbor means renouncing faith.”

On Facebook, when I posted this, one friend objected, pointing out that: “Francis of Assisi embraced lepers knowing he was not a carrier — he put his own life at risk. Pope Francis asks we keep distance knowing we may be carriers ourselves, and that embracing puts the one embraced in danger.” The observation is a fair one; the problem with this risk-aversive reflection is not only that it misses the point Agamben had sought to make with respect to intimacy and love but that it presupposes the dogma of the carrier, an invisible dogma as the carrier in question is held to contaminate asymptotically.

The possibilities of suspicion are infinite.

As I argued in 2015, “[Calling Science Pseudoscience](#),” what is at issue is the question of disease and not less the question of science as such, engaging a range of thinkers and scientists, including Ludwik Fleck, Thomas Kuhn, Peter Duesberg, Richard Lewontin, Martin Heidegger, and Bruno Latour (and Alexander Nehamas). (Cf. a video-excerpt, [What is a Disease?](#).)

The current agent of contagion is an invisible enemy, and because invisible, because statistics as reported along with testing and confirmation are and will be matters of state decree, a permanent threat, grounds for the very permanent state of exception that had exercised Agamben's worry.

This is theory, not fact and ruling that uncertain science is certain enough to justify changing the law of every land does not make the science any more scientific if it also does not abrogate the law.

This is Agamben's worry in his recent post:

“in this case, every limit has been surpassed, and one has the impression that the words of the prime minister and of the head of civil defense, as was said of those of the Führer, immediately have the force of law. And we do not see how, going beyond the temporal limits of validity of the emergency decrees, the limitations of freedom could, as is foretold, be maintained. With what juridical apparatuses? With a permanent state of exception?”

— Giorgio Agamben

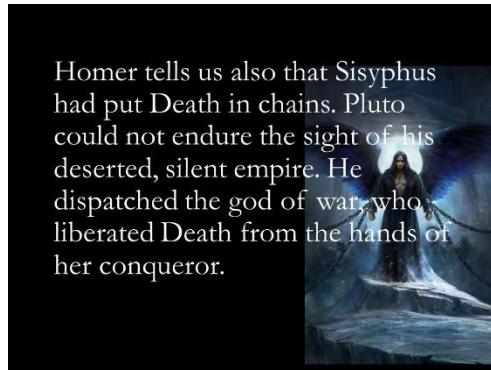
We should worry. But we are, as noted at the outset, agreed in advance, complicit in advance. And as Simone de Beauvoir observed, to the ongoing irritation of feminists of every generation and wave, we are often very well-pleased with ‘the deal,’ party to ‘the deal,’ complicit in ‘the deal,’ this complicity ensures compliance.

Camus's *The Plague* is on everyone's lips, but relevant as well is Camus' short essay [*The Myth of Sisyphus*](#). Key to Camus' existentialist absurdism is a certain preoccupation with death, and we remember that the theme is omnipresent for the ancient Greeks who had, as many cultures do, a death cult.

We are named for death, *thanatoi*, mortals. For the Hellenes, our being bound to die as we are, our nature as creatures of a day is key to everything, learning how to live is learning how to die and, of course, of course, we typically learn neither. — This failure is fine by the Greeks. Like other ancient cultures, the ancient Greeks espoused a recycling theory of the soul. We'll get another chance, badly, as swine or lesser beings, they supposed, and again work our way up to getting the point, after some multiple thousand-year cycle of birth and rebirth.

Only the Judeo-Christian tradition models its souls on non-recyclable, one-off, one-way bottles. That the last is the tradition of modern science is no accident.

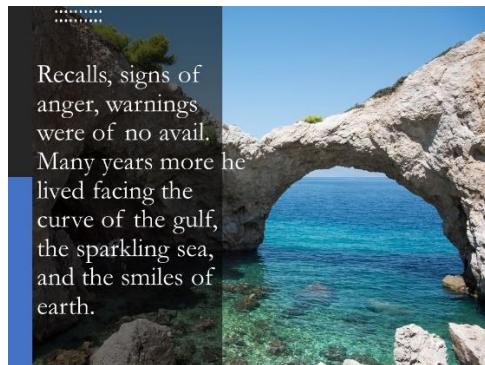
To return to Sisyphus, Camus tells us that he had a way with death, and once — shades of Severus Snape's opening word-promise to teach his students “to put a stopper in death” — managed to put death itself in chains.



Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

(I illustrate the consequences in a recent [video](#) lecture on Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* so infelicitous was this that Mars/Ares, the god of war had to be dispatched, so Camus tells us, to appease Pluto/Hades aggrieved to find his kingdom empty).

Cavalier as he was toward death, Sisyphus, as he lay dying, instructed his wife to dispense with the rites of the dead and to cast his body into the public square, an end-of-life directive his wife duly fulfilled. When, upon thus finding himself in the underworld absent the rites due the dead, Camus reports that Sisyphus was "annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love." And good persuader as Sisyphus was, he was able to talk Pluto/Hades, god of the Underworld into allowing him to return to the Overworld, the world above, the world of the living, ostensibly to reprimand his wife (Pluto/Hades having his own problems with his own wife was predictably receptive to such a motive). But immediately, once Sisyphus was returned to the land of the living he lost any thought of revenge and simply lived, refusing, as long as ever he could, to return.



Eventually Mercury/Hermes, the collector of souls, would be sent to drag Sisyphus back down to the Underworld, where his "rock was waiting for him."

If we pay attention to the freedom, the liberty of movement taken from us, we begin to understand the reason the last line of *The Myth of Sisyphus* urges: "We must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Indeed, just to be prosaic about it, why wouldn't he be happy: Sisyphus, alone of the souls of the dead relegated to the plains of asphodel in the underworld, Sisyphus is allowed to climb mountains: his rock being a major burden — Camus calls him "the proletarian of the gods" —

but also and not less the reason he is ‘compelled’ to ascend again and again from the underworld toward the world above, the ‘overworld,’ the world of the living, of which he was so fond.

The Greeks liked the metaphor and when Odysseus summons the souls of the dead in Homer’s *Nykia*, Achilles famously declares, he could not be more passionate, that he would rather return to the land of the living as a day laborer than rule heroically in the underworld. Could Achilles ‘will backwards,’ one imagines he would have left the battlefield behind, Hector would still be living, possibly Patroclus too, leaving the Trojan War to smolder along on its own.

To repeat Agamben’s most important because uncanny reflection on what Nietzsche called “first and last things,” again:

“[h]ow could we have accepted, solely in the name of a risk that it was not possible to specify, that persons who are dear to us and human beings in general should not only die alone, but — something that had never happened before in history, from Antigone to today — that their cadavers should be burned without a funeral?”

Our humanity begins, so certain paleoanthropologists tell us, with burial rites: we are human not because we are wise, but because, and we share this with our hominid relative, *h. neanderthalensis*, we bury our dead, with care, what Heidegger named ‘*Fürsorge*,’ that is, with the kind of ritual of which, paleontologists tell us, traces remain over millennia.



Juliet Binoche,
Antigone, trans.
Anne Carson,
NYC, 2015

Antigone tells us that she is bound to the law [νόμος is the word she uses], so she tells Creon, brother of her mother, father of her betrothed, the same Creon who needs her to secure his own claim to lawful rule. The brothers who slew one another fought so bitterly that, Sophocles says, they were unrecognizable in death and so, because “it was not possible to specify” which brother had been loyal to Thebes and which sought to take it by force, a body was chosen to be singled out as Polyneices [Πολυνείκης, famously noted etymologically as meaning ‘manifold strife,’ Empedocles uses the same term, νεικος, for a cosmic cycle of enmity] in order that the cadaver be denied the funeral rites every mortal required for passage to the afterlife. To save her brother from an eternity unmourned, Antigone defied the edict of Creon’s law, at the cost of her life.

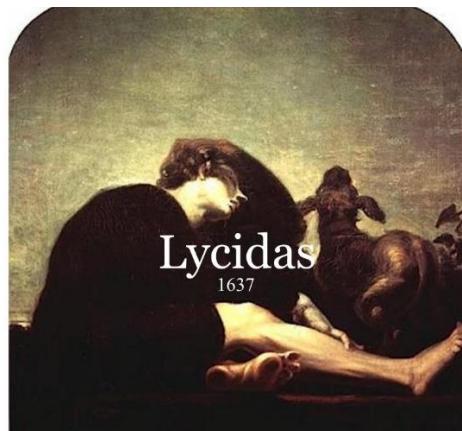
Love compelled Haemon, Creon's son to defy his ban, and he, after failing his lunge against his father, turned his own sword on himself.

Love-Death.

Those who argue that the two, Creon and Antigone are both right, both following the law as they see it, each by their own lights, are mistaken, although I have found myself in class repeating this conventional interpretation of Sophocles. For everyone knows that Creon follows the law of opportunism: this is what he says in vulgar precision to his son, as he tells him he must forsake Antigone, even as Creon needs to enforce his decree to ensure his regency as law. Antigone follows not only a higher command but the essential command.

Thanatoi, as we are, children of a day, mortals, we need those who will mourn us and still more urgently we need to do the same in our turn.

There are those who claim, justifiably so, that the best poem in the English language is a poem of mourning. This is John Milton's *Lycidas*.



We must always ‘build the lofty rhyme.’

We need poetry *and* art, as we also need, so Sophocles tells us, as Aeschylus tells us in yet more dreadful fashion, rituals for the dead.

What *we* allow to be done in our names, what *we are doing*, what we have *already allowed to be done*, is wrong.

18 April 2020, Winchester, Hampshire, UK