

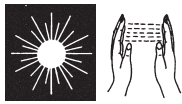
Alienation and Space for Radical Love

About fifteen years ago, a 25-year-old woman moved from Prague to a small town just near the Catalonian capital of Barcelona. She brought with her a secularized, religiously liberal and global-oriented mindset. Soon after finding a Catalonian husband, she started encountering the differences between the values of her own family, and those of her husband's parents. One of the central disagreements stemmed from the fact that her in-laws had reservations about what originally motivated this young woman to move to Catalonia, why she had married her husband, and why she wanted to have two children with him. One day, during a particularly vicious argument with her husband's parents, she heard their heretofore unvoiced opinion that, as a migrant from the Czech Republic, she left her family and found a new one abroad in order to find a man who would provide for her financially. No matter how much time, energy and love she had dedicated to her family, even after fifteen years of living with her husband, whom she married in a church in truly Catholic fashion, she was accused of having purely selfish and material interests. This accusation was so painful to her, that instead of trying to prove her true motives, she decided to completely stop communicating with her mother-in-law.

In 2018, a year before the eruption of the global coronavirus pandemic, I advised this young woman to attempt at reconciliation with her mother-in-law; after all, she was an elderly lady who was getting close to eighty, and the unresolved issues might weigh on everyone involved. A year later, the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic erupted especially strongly in Spain. The mother-in-law returned from a long-planned holiday with a sharp cough, and she was transported to hospital two days later, where she was however denied admittance to the Intensive Care Unit, as these life-saving means were, in the chaotic conditions of a provincial hospital, reserved for those whose life was deemed more precious. The woman's state worsened. One day her mother-in-law was feeling better, and the young woman from Czechia came to visit her at the hospital, in order to wish the elder lady a quick recovery and offer her psychological support. A few days later, the mother-in-law's state again worsened and she died soon afterwards. Disposal of the body was done in almost mechanical haste due to fears of further infection: the body was transferred along with other cadavers to the morgue and incinerated as quickly as possible. No final farewell was allowed, as the hospital did not wish to risk anything. All personal disagreements remained unresolved.

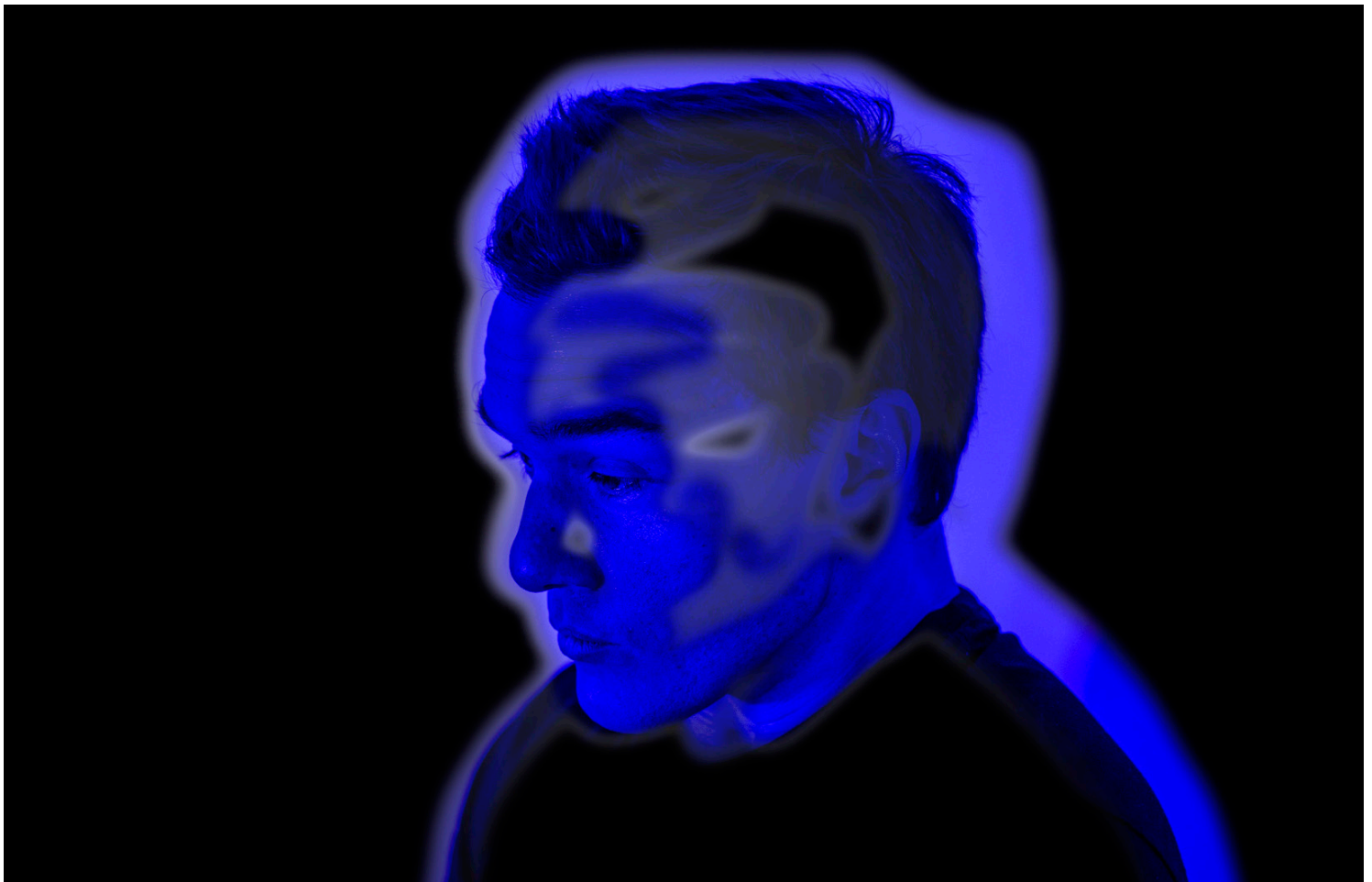
The preceding story is not in any way unique. During the coronavirus crisis, many people lost their loved ones, and oftentimes in worse manner. But I do think this short probe into daily life uniquely shows how common it is to replace our thoughts of mortality and death with any ideological system which might offer us blind solace, and provide alibi for postponing personal problems to a distant and indefinite future. There always seems to be time for that.

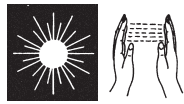
In the case of the woman from Prague, this ideology rested on the assessment that her mother-in-law was a naturally bad woman. In my opinion, this young woman, whose motivations I have come to understand very closely, was not able to assess the difference between being mad at her mother-in-law and the much more important fact that her mother-in-law is an elderly lady who grew up in a wholly different culture, with a different education and values, all of which colluded to inform her thinking. Instead of the younger woman from Prague rising above, she fell back on the comfort of a story of her own devising – that the mother-in-law is evil and does not like her, and that this is the best reason for erasing her presence from her everyday life. Was the mother-in-law in fact like that? Perhaps. But because the young woman did not attempt a rational and candid dialogue with her about their mutual sympathies and antipathies, no one will ever know. Even before the death brought on by the coronavirus, a great chasm of



misunderstanding, which was deeper than any geographical or objective distance, opened up between the two women. No one wanted to talk things out. Neither party had an interest in changing, despite both wanting to improve the relationship, yet not at the cost of sacrificing one's own position, opinion, ideology, which all masked the complexity of another person's lived reality (with all its positive, negative and contrary characteristics), rather making of them a comfortable caricature which made an easy target for accusation and hate.

If we want to change our relationship to other people, we assume that we will be able to change the other person. But are we even aware of the fact that we are assuming that it is the other person who ought to change? Perhaps our relationship with others suffers only because we are the victims of our own imaginations, and the illusions we have developed about who we think the other person ought to become. It is not very plausible that we have created an accurate image of the other person's character. It is much more probable that our existing idea and knowledge about other people dramatically circumscribe our ability to truly understand them. Whether we call this preconceived understanding of other people "stereotypes," or mere "heuristics" of our limited animal psychology, it constitutes a type of filter for how much knowledge, emotion and non-verbal signals coming from others we are able to accommodate. And the less a person matters to us, the less open we are with them, and the more we filter anything which pertains to the given person.



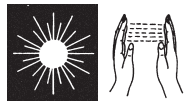


All of us unavoidably approach not only other people, but also the world at large with a certain degree of preunderstanding, as this allows us to give meaning to the things around us, and influences what we pay attention to. Preunderstanding is not a disease; it is an inherent part of the human condition and stems from the fact that we are steeped in history whose events, values, heroes and anti-heroes form our dreams, opinions and goals. Preunderstanding is not only something which comes from the past but, following the 20th century existentialists, preunderstandings keep evolving and developing in relation to our own subjective experiences. If it weren't for preconceiving of the heroes of the past, we would have to rework our value system from scratch every morning before we get out of bed, as it would be the only thing which would make us get up, get dressed and go to school or work. Every morning we would thus have to re-incarnate Nietzsche's figure of the *Übermensch*, who is able to create value without making recourse to the cycles of history.

Preunderstanding is a human necessity. But like all powerful instruments, even this one has its negative aspects. If we aren't trying to actively and consciously update our preunderstandings, we risk becoming a sleeping surfer on the waves of history, which are moved by those with power and those willing to carry out their individual vision of our collective future. Passively referencing the inherited historical, cultural and social preunderstandings makes of individual members of the collective pawns within another's game, fated to be sacrificed for a goal which remains unknown to them and is not theirs; yet they follow anyway, as the pressure to conform to the dominant trends dictated by the billion-dollar industry of neuromarketing, PR work and the virtual politics of virtue signaling are simply too strong. Any part of the political spectrum can fall prey to deeply-rooted preunderstandings, whether it is the conservative who idealizes the good old times, or the progressivist who fills their preunderstandings with the fundamentalism of an ahistorical present – a preunderstanding which only seems novel due to its ignorance or the willful forgetting of the past.

If preunderstanding, meaning our actions as they are determined by historical background, is an integral part of human life, but also a factor which limits openness towards new experiences and other people, we can ask to what degree we are able to transcend these preunderstandings, or at least limit their influence on our thinking. Why should we do this? In the case of the afore-mentioned migrant from Czechia who found herself in argument with her Catalanian mother-in-law, we can say that reflecting more on one's own constructed ideology about the elder woman's corrupt nature and unworthiness could have led to an important moment of reconciliation, before death made that possibility void. That does not mean that an open discussion would have resolved all qualms – saying that your daughter-in-law is only after money is an attack on the person's most intimate character – but the unwillingness, which soon turned to impossibility, to come to another person with an open mind and an open heart and attempt to, perhaps for the first time, truly understand them, made sure that the argument would never get resolved.

Both women lacked the capacity for *alienation* from the everyday routines dictated by one's own constructed ideology of another, as well as a deep preunderstanding of how disputes ought and ought not to be resolved. By alienation, I mean a radical uprootedness from the everyday, which is often unfortunately brought about by the death of a loved one, and which allows a person to grasp her or his life and its course as an object for reflection. It is the moment when a person transcends their sense of self, and one which often brings existential angst, largely due to the



sudden imposition of becoming acutely responsible for oneself. But this moment of alienation is also the site of vast potential. A person can consciously remain in their alienated state and explore direct contact with reality and with others. I consider existential alienation as a form of parenthesis, similar to Husserl's epoché of the everyday which gives us the opportunity to experience reality in its most purified form, beyond preunderstandings and ideologies.

Husserl and his followers attempted to purge their intentional relationship to the world so that they might reach the essence which lay within the objects of their perception. Understandably, one of the many possible objects was also the relationship to other people. For the proponents of Husserl, the parenthesis placed on the world coupled with a certain form of alienation provided the methodology for creating a new rigorous science of consciousness. But when we apply this methodology to human relationships, we reach an absolute openness to the other, a relationship without any ideology or theory about whom the other is and how we ought to approach them. On the one hand, this parenthesis leads to an existential experience of alienation and results in anxiety, while on the other, this subjective emptying can also be understood as a form of radical openness and acceptance of the Other, or *radical love*: a non-filtered wish to, if only for a moment, experience the essence of the Other.

Of course, this is a dangerous act in which we become vulnerable to anyone who might be motivated to take advantage of our radical love. There is no mathematical formula or philosophical system which might predecide the success of our radical love. In this space of alienation, self-parenthesis, and radical love we can only invoke Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" – we can hope that strong faith will, in the end, lead to a qualitative change of our relationship to the Other (human, God) and, vicariously, also to ourselves.

Apart from death, there exists a qualitatively equal mode of experience which can also evoke feelings of momentary alienation: art. As the Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan said, artists work to create an indispensable layer within society. Due to their psychological constitution and artistic training, they play the role of "antennae of the race," which are able to engage with the phenomena of the collective unconscious, as well as social and technological infrastructures, and make them visible to others by giving them an aesthetic form, allowing the everyman to experience what, under other circumstances, remains hidden.

Art is thus presented with the opportunity to avoid the current trend of "verbalizing art," where the physical or haptic experience is replaced by the dominance of narrative content and the signaling of the proper, social morals, and rather return to uncovering ignored, invisible, forgotten experiences; especially those which can simulate a temporary death of the subject, and which allows our subjectivity to avoid a stereotypical experience dictated by the preunderstandings of self and Other. Radical openness allows us to reclaim our unfiltered, immediate relationship to the Other. Art has the capacity to propose architectural spaces and open-ended dramatical scenarios where our desubjectivized Self can become reconciled with the love for people who have, to the majority of the population, remained invisible. Not necessarily because the majority is cruel, but rather that they have been conditioned by an unconscious ideology which dictates that it is proper to disengage from anything stereotypically untoward; meaning anything which might open a gap in the Matrix and reveal a truth – a truth about the role which embodiment plays in the constitution of our lives, as well as the truth of our own mortality.