

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A LIMIT EXPERIENCE  
OF THE SENSE OF EXISTENCE  
OF THE POST-MODERN HUMAN BEING

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La pandemia del Covid-19 como experiencia  
límite del sentido de la existencia  
del ser humano posmoderno

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Abstract

After the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared the pandemic situation on March 11, 2020, the world changed because, Covid-19 caused postmodern society to wonder about existence, on its meaning, on its end. However, once again, what is disturbing again is not the search for a conceptual answer, but one as a human existential experience. This article, based on a bibliographic research, presents a philosophical approach to the Covid-19 pandemic as a limit experience of the meaning of existence of the postmodern human being, which reveals the great ethical and human crisis that characterizes postmodernity, and therefore Through the hegemony of conceptual frameworks, it has placed thousands of human beings in existential destitution. For this reason, this work is limited to human experience in this context; which is done from the existential ontological, without necessarily implying intrinsic structures to being, as a categorical search but rather that the ontological is rooted in existence; in such a way that, allusion is made to the work of Butler (2006a) to try to avoid that the philosophical elucubration remains in the nominal conceptual, distorting the existential approach.

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Keywords

Pandemic, vulnerability, hegemonic frameworks, nakedness of being, existential philosophy, face.

**Suggested citation:** Ortega, Remberto (2021). The Covid-19 pandemic as a limit experience of the sense of existence of the post-modern human being. *Sophía, colección de Filosofía de la Educación*, 30, pp. 265-287.

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### Resumen

Después que el Director General de la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declarara la situación de pandemia el 11 de marzo de 2020, el mundo cambió pues, el Covid-19 provocó que, la sociedad posmoderna se pregunte sobre la existencia, sobre su sentido, sobre su fin. Sin embargo, una vez más, lo que vuelve a inquietar no es la búsqueda de una respuesta conceptual, sino una en cuanto experiencia existencial humana. Este artículo, basado en una investigación bibliográfica, presenta una aproximación filosófica de la pandemia del Covid-19 como experiencia límite del sentido de la existencia del ser humano posmoderno, que desvela la gran crisis ética y humana que caracteriza a la posmodernidad, y que por medio de la hegemonía de marcos conceptuales ha colocado a miles de seres humanos en la indigencia existencial. Por ello, dicho trabajo se delimita a la experiencia humana en este contexto; lo cual se hace desde lo ontológico existencial, sin que ello implique necesariamente estructuras intrínsecas al ser, como una búsqueda categorial sino más bien que lo ontológico se enraiza en la existencia; de tal manera que, se hace alusión a la obra de Butler (2006b) para tratar de evitar que la elucubración filosófica se quede en lo conceptual nominal, desvirtuando el enfoque existencial.

### Palabras clave

Pandemia, vulnerabilidad, marcos hegemónicos, desnudez del ser, filosofía existencial, rostro.

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## Introduction

When it comes to philosophizing about existence, there are many paths that can be traveled, however, one of the most interesting approaches is found in the work of Arendt (1968) and that serves as a starting point for reflection on what this article is about and what it says:

Descartes had already posed the problem of reality in a completely modern sense — to solve it in an entirely traditional sense. The question: if Being as such is modern: the answer, *cogito ergo sum* falls into a void; for, as Nietzsche rightly noted, it does not prove the existence of the *ego cogitans* but at most that of the *cogitare*. In other words, the I think never produces the truly living I, but only a thought I. This is what we know from Kant (p. 52).

Based on what Arendt expresses, the disturbing questioning about being arises thought from the categorial and what the experience of the living being entails, that is, the question about existence again worries, not as a question but as a human existential experience and after the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared the pandemic situation on March 11, 2020, things have changed because Covid-19 seems to exceed any of the many theories that are born of spirits that, attached to nominal categories that are based and satisfied in schemes of analysis, controlled experimentation, planning, and forecasting, especially that of the positive sciences, have been surpassed.

In this order of ideas, it is inevitable not to infer that humanity has had to recognize that rancid nature, unconquerable, changing, ungraspable, has been confronted with the fragility and vulnerability that human existence entails; which has not only threatened the complex and worn out traditional economic-political systems, but has gone further by breaking with categorical assumptions that have led to a state of hysteria and paranoia of human thought. Then, paraphrasing Arendt (1968), it is possible to notice how the thinking human being is not necessarily it and exhausts the truly living human being.

This article, based on a bibliographic research, presents a philosophical approach to the Covid-19 pandemic as a limit experience of the meaning of existence of the postmodern human being. To do this, a structured reflection will be followed that deals with three great moments: in the first, it will reflect on the categorical and the existential in human experience; the second section presents the study on vulnerability and the encounter with the other; the third part deals with the exercise of power and categorical invisibility; to later finish with some conclusions.

It is necessary to note that this work is limited to the human experience in the Latin American context; which is done from the existential ontological, without necessarily implying intrinsic structures to being, as a categorical search but rather that the ontological is rooted in existence; therefore we allude the work of Butler (2006a) to try to avoid that the philosophical elucubration that remains in the nominal conceptual, distorting the existential approach, and that in this way it is avoided the to appeal to the responsibility, either of the human being as an individual or in his/her social component from the political and economic apparatus. In other words, the ontology referred to is not conceptual univocal from the traditionally acceptable, but rather from the equivocal.

A deliberation is proposed from the existential ontology, from the limit situations and human conditions such as the fragility, the neediness and the vulnerability that every human being experiences. To do this, having the thought of Butler (2010) as a common thread, it is intended to reflect on the pandemic: as a limit experience of the meaning of existence of the postmodern human being.

The ontological vision that is presented as the common thread of this philosophical abstraction, follows some of the ideas of Butler (2010) when expressing that:

To speak of 'ontology' in this regard is not to claim a description of fundamental structures of being different from any other social or political



organization. Rather, on the contrary, none of these terms exist outside of their political organization and interpretation (p. 15).

This crisis that is not only a health one, but is ethical and deeply human, demands a reflection because, after the deadlines are met and the contagion curve is flattened, humanity will inevitably have to reflect and decide on whether the virus will evolve to transform it in the excuse that increases and validates human misery, the forgetfulness of the other, the supremacy of the economic over existence, the banality of evil.

Based on the aforementioned, there is no shortage of experts who continue to focus on tangential elements such as the reinvention of the cold war, changes in the financial and stock market system, which translate into radical changes in the geopolitical scenario, with new points of friction between superpowers or rethinking of supranational figures, among others that continue to be speeches and conjectures, all of which show a crisis of the human. And it is that despite the pain and grief experienced worldwide, a reconstruction process has not yet been proposed to reduce the gap between the powerful and the forgotten, between validated subjects and those lacking dignity, because we insist on returning to normality where empathy with honesty, commitment, and responsibility, with respect for life projects derived from one's own personal history and much less with the safeguarding of the promotion of relationships between peers, between equals, as worthy persons do not coexist.

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## From the categorical to the existential of ontology

It is necessary to take into account that, as Vélez (2015) warns, in recent years humanity has witnessed, what has been called in some academic circles, as the flexibility of the notion of ontology, a product of a multiplicity and diversity of theories and ontological conceptions that are not limited to the philosophical field exclusively but are observed in the most dissimilar disciplines, for example in the field of psychological, managerial, biomedical, computer science, systems engineering among many others, which it gives the impression of living an ontological renaissance.

This proliferation has brought with it an interminable battle in which it is sought to delimit in the most certain way the different domains of study or fields of action, advocating specificity, autonomy, and independence of the ontology itself that threatens an exact ignorance of what, for what and how of the sustenance of each of these derivations. For this reason, it is imperative to clearly establish the type of ontology that will be guiding this reflection.

In an article in the Journal Sophia N °17 entitled The Ontology of Education as a reference for understanding Ortega and Fernández (2014) it was stated that:

The certainty that education should be understood not as something abstract but as something concrete that it is, forces us to recognize that it is only possible in the human being. Then, it is a human act because only man starts with the question, in an effort to apprehend the world (p. 41).

The main idea about the ontology that both authors express can be used as a basis to refer to the fact of approaching this reflection as a limit existential situation with a handle on an existential ontology; Because just as the authors suggest that education is not something abstract because it occurs in the concrete of the human being, also the limit situation of fear and vulnerability occur in an existing and concrete being that also asks about the meaning of this suffering, this vulnerability, this pandemic and all this in their desire to apprehend the world.

However, a deeper conception of this term requires thinking about it from the etymological point of view. And, according to Gutiérrez Sáenz (1999), ontology can be defined as:

The logos or knowledge of the entity. And technically it is usually defined as the science of entity as entity. entity is everything that has to be; In the same way that we call every person who studies, or lover someone who loves, entity is the term that we can use to refer to things to the extent that they have being (pp. 56-57).

However, in this article, beyond the categorical and etymological concept, reference is made to an ontology from experience, from not only nominal existence, that is why it is important to take up valuable elements of existential philosophy and ethics of the encounter, as proposed by Judith Butler (2010), who has generated a new philosophical proposal that is framed in the central thesis that one is human as beings in relation but not only a relationship with an equal but with the other, even with what is outside the conventional categories of the human, that is, with the non-human.

This is how the ontology of vulnerability presented by Butler (2006a), becomes an adequate conceptual-existential element to speculate on the pandemic as a limit situation, which forces us to think not only about the virus, but also causes us to interpret the entire local, regional and global social fabric. In this order of ideas and paraphrasing Santamaría (2020), the reflection on vulnerability personifies a reference to cate-



gorical structures in many of the human fields that requires asking the question about the approach applied to the ontological, since for some the hegemony of systems and ways of thinking rooted in a categorical ontology, is undoubtedly one of the elements causing this state of collective paranoia where social, cultural, moral and economic systems have not been able to ensure the well-being of the human being, to the point of plunging into a limit situation.

## How to understand the limit in human experience?

All human beings, sooner or later, experience situations that, paraphrasing Jasper (1950), constitute the frameworks of man's inner spiritual life and of his practical activity. These frames form the limits of existence, beyond which nothingness extends. The frames of one's existence become existentially palpable when we experience fear, suffering, vulnerability, struggle, dissatisfaction, and death. However, perhaps the most relevant thing in these situations is their character of fatality and universality, the human being cannot avoid them; their overcoming means the loss of existence.

So, following what was expressed in the previous paragraph, it is possible to deduce why it is necessary to understand that the Covid-19 pandemic constitutes a limit situation and that it has generated that thousands of people around the world to experience fear, anguish, and vulnerability.

Proof of this can be found in the article in *La Gaceta de Salamanca* (2020) in which the psychological impact of Covid-19 and the confinement situation derived from the state of alarm decreed by the Spanish Government to combat the spread of the virus was evidenced. This study revealed that people between 18 and 39 years old are those who present more anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms, as well as a greater feeling of loneliness and lack of company.

Beyond the statistical and percentage figures, the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, in its multiple conceptions, constitutes an ample, flexible, and strong platform to serve as a turning point and the perfect setting for the review of the solipsistic reason of the great hegemonic systems of thought, to meet with what had condemned to eccentricities such as: feelings, volitions, desires, fears, passions, necessity, as members of the human race. It is then possible to admit, as Butler (2006a) affirms, the need to get out of the strictly categorial-nominal becomes imperative in order to provoke an ontological irruption from the vulnerability that serves as a transversal axis in the reflection of the experience.



Reflection from experience makes it possible for all those subjective elements of the existence of and in each human being to converge that gives that degree of objectivity to the human person, since he/she is also soul, conscience, mind, and thanks to this, has the ability to enter the process of understanding the real.

## The need for a reflection rooted in the experience of one's own existence

Understanding the real, from what is experienced and shared with the other does not occur from the academic, numerical, or nominal but from concrete existence, from the body, from mortality that cannot be simply categorized. This idea of the impossibility of categorizing mortality is observed throughout the work of Butler (2006a), who somehow suggests that it is necessary to experience one's own mortality, vulnerability, destitution, fragility, heteronomy, ambiguity. This can be better understood in the following phrase by Butler (2006a): "from the skin, the flesh, the senses, the memory, the desire, all this exposes us, takes us out of ourselves and puts us in front of the other" (p. 36).

The aforementioned allows us to understand that existence is not lived only from the private and the incommunicable, but has a component of responsibility and communication that arises in the encounter with another in a common place that is shared, which is called the body. In terms of Butler (2006a):

The body is not entirely ours; it is not something private but public. My life is involved in other lives. My life is not completely mine. We come into the world in need of hospitality and this vulnerable condition cannot be avoided, it cannot be overcome (p. 44).

If the experience of vulnerability is intrinsic to every human being, as an essential component of existence itself, then it is necessary to ask the following question: how could vulnerability be defined within this reflection? It will be answered in the next section.

## Vulnerability as constitutive of humanity

On the official site of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2020), the following definition of vulnerability can be found:

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Vulnerability in this context can be defined as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard. The concept is relative and dynamic. Vulnerability is most often associated with poverty, but it can also arise when people are isolated, insecure and defenceless in the face of risk, shock or stress. (p.1)

From the previous definition, attention can be focused on the idea of diminished capacity, because this decrease is rooted in the fact that every human being is exposed to different situations such as disasters, diseases, or others that violently disrupt their existence.

Violence, paraphrasing Butler (2006b), can be considered a legitimizing experience that calls for an ontology of vulnerability because, given the fact that all human beings have a mortal body that can be injured, all are exposed to violence that it translates into vulnerability. In other words, violence can be understood as the cause of vulnerability and when that vulnerability is exacerbated, it causes, according to medical literature, an irruption in the life of a human being so devastating that it becomes existential suffering, since it refers to the perception of meaninglessness, anxiety and fear of death.

In this regard, it is important to take into account the etymological definition of this word, because if vulnerability is the genesis of that existential suffering insofar as it means fragility, susceptibility to damage or injury. However, going a little further, it is necessary to resort to the etymology, as mentioned by Pacheco (2017): “the term - vulnerability - comes from the Latin *vulnus* which can be understood as “wound” or “damage”, *abilis* that can be equivalent to “that can”, and the suffix given that indicates quality” (p. 7).

The etymological definition can still be understood in a better way, as stated by Pacheco himself (2017): “vulnerability can then be defined as the quality that someone has to be able to be hurt or damaged” (p. 7). However, it is also important to note that vulnerability does not necessarily imply a position of passivity, and that some theoretical approaches establish that vulnerable people are those who, for different reasons, do not have the capacity to prevent, resist and overcome an impact and, therefore, are at risk. With which it could be understood that being vulnerable is a matter of ability.

The final idea of the previous paragraph has been accepted in many of the hegemonic academic circles that, ignoring a sense of responsibility for the other, confines itself to enclosing it in its own capacities, even relegating it to the plane of the volitional. Then it is possible that popular affirmations are heard such as: you are poor because you want to! You suffer because you want to! or you are vulnerable because you want to!



It is worth noting that the hegemonic social discourse is what is creating reality, insofar as, even, the intrinsically human experience of vulnerability is questioned from the spaces of that power that Butler (2006b) denounces as the cause of a person, up to a certain point, moves in a certain reality, and at the same time legitimizes exclusions based on social norms and produces abject bodies, which are inadmissible, unintelligible and illegitimate.

In this order of ideas, it is legal to review the following definition proposed by Villa (2001):

Vulnerability is the risk or probability that an individual, a home or a community may be injured or damaged as a result of changes in the conditions of the context in which it is located or by virtue of its own limitations (pp. 3-4).

However, this risk can only be recognized by others as legitimate if it occurs within a legitimate hegemonic regulatory framework where, paraphrasing Butler (2010), illegitimate bodies cannot exist, since these, if the system admits that they exist, they will only do it outside the norm since they are intelligible just as abject. This is where their lack of recognition lies.

Categorized vulnerability cannot be the one that governs this encounter with the other, rather existential vulnerability, because all human beings have the capacity to experience vulnerability and vulnerability is not conceptual but existential.

Only an experienced, admitted, and recognized vulnerability is the concatenated axis of human existence as the possibility of experiencing this pain, which becomes an interruption in the order of being. That is to say, every human being who has existed, exists, or will exist, will experience to a greater or lesser degree that vulnerability that violence generates and it is in that vulnerability that the way in which the relationship with the other constitutes is revealed, since “the wound helps me understand that there are others outside on whom my life depends” (Butler, 2006b, p. 14). Then, the human emerges in the nakedness of being. However, it is necessary to pause to understand this of the nakedness of being.

## The encounter with the other as a naked experience of being

Throughout Levinas’s work, he introduced one of the most representative elements of philosophical action and that is the concept of the ‘face’.



This Levinasian concept does not necessarily refer to an aesthetic or plastic idea, but strictly makes it an equivalent of nudity. For example, nudity that translates into vulnerability, perhaps the extreme experience of this being death. But, death is not my death but the death of the other and it is that for Levinas (1994) “we meet death on the faces of others” (p.126).

When the human being encounters death in the face of the other, this fact existentially challenges him and questions him about the responsibility he has for it and that is, for Levinas, ethics arises there, when the human being recognizes that the life of the another is more important than his own, this is what sublimely makes him human, because he is not assumed to be unique from an existential egoism, but rather understood in relationship, in permanent encounter, in a codependency where his own being necessarily exists because it is recognized on the other that also validates it.

The Covid-19 experience has allowed all human beings to experience their vulnerability within a period of time that suffocates them personally, but they have also seen it reflected in the others with whom they inhabit this world; it inevitably confronts them to question themselves about time, about the duration of this evil that afflicts them. However, this question of duration, for time, becomes an ethical and existential question as it relates to another, as expressed by Levinas (1993):

...think of time not as a degradation of eternity, but as a relationship with that which, being itself inassimilable, absolutely other, would not allow itself to be assimilated by experience, or with that which, being itself infinite, would not allow itself to be understood (p. 69).

Non-understanding refers to the limit of the categorial-nominal; However, from the existential, the ethical assimilation causes the human being to ask himself: have I experienced my humanity? or, rather: have human beings experienced that humanity of which Levinas speaks when encountering the pain that is reflected on the face of that other?

## From the multitude of faces to the invisibility of the face

On the website of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)<sup>1</sup> you can find a large amount of information about the Covid-19 pandemic at the level of figures and it is curious to observe how the main statistics refer to three main metrics to know:

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- The number of days elapsed since the detection of the first infected in America.
- The confirmed cases of infected.
- Cases of confirmed deaths.

All these figures and statistics are important for those who, in terms of quantifying, make projections, prepare predictive and deductive mathematical models, using these inputs. However, it is not about accounting for the suffering through the victims, but about finding a face, that is, with the concrete human being, who is beyond numbers, because from the ethics that Levinas has proposed, the ethics of the encounter with the face, each human being in this historical moment is asked a question about his responsibility towards that other who suffers. This ethical question demands a singular and personal answer.

The answer to the ethical question goes beyond a deontological theory that establishes norms that govern conduct and performance in the professional sphere, and this going further occurs because it is an existential question that exceeds the prerogative of the professional circle where responsibilities are determined in relationship with acts related to the labor field; because as Levinas (1994) outlines: “we find death on the faces of others” (p.126).

This encounter with the death of the other, paraphrasing Levinas (2006), becomes an ethical question that, starting from the face of the other in its precariousness, in its vulnerability, in its need, is for each human being the temptation to kill and the call to peace. Kill him in terms of getting rid of that other, relegate him to oblivion; or of peace, as soon as he goes out to meet him, assists him, helps him, recognizes himself being interpellated. This demand for a response is what the heads of state, the great world organizations have felt, and each one of them is struggling between the temptation to kill (disengage) or fill with peace (go out to meet).

The idea of peace and slaughter in the ethics of Levinas (2006), goes beyond the fight that health professionals wage against Covid-19 in hospitals, clinics, among others; but the one that is fought in parliaments, assemblies, houses of deputies, boards of directors of international organizations, non-governmental organizations, where some seek to ignore the other (kill) while others seek peace (go out to meet them). The decision to go out to meet or look away is intertwined with ethics, but not only with it, but with the theory of the subject of law that is based on the legal conceptualization of human life. This point is the one that, in the



view of Butler (2012), allows us to understand that power organizes life and disposes of it, also operating on precariousness, and deciding on the lives that are or are not worthy of mourning, saving, or let perish. In this sense, it is important to refer to Varsi (2017):

Life is one, but —whether biological or social— it adopts different stages that deserve regulation according to its status. It is this essence and way in which life is presented in society that allows it to be legally categorized and this is the subject of law theory. In this way human life is regulated in its true essence and dimension; However, procreative and genomic biotechnology has been altering its classic taxonomy, varying it, by presenting new actors in a world of relationship (p.1).

The idea of the subject of law is what has been defining many of the actions undertaken in such a way that, throughout all of America, it has allowed us to observe that, although in the collective imagination it is thought of equal rights or that all are subjects of law, nothing is further from reality. Fernández (2009) expresses this social construct through the following statement:

In legal experience - in the existential dimension - this body or normative reference center is none other than the human being before birth or after this event has occurred, whether it is considered individually or as an organization of people (p. 3).

This expressed by Fernández, is not necessarily true because, although all human beings run the risk of being infected with Covid-19, sharing the experience of vulnerability, not all are necessarily considered subjects of law, as they continue to be judged from the frameworks conceptual hegemonics, where the important thing may be the figure (faces in the plural) and not the face (the human being in his dignity as a person).

## From the politically correct to an exercise of power

This dilemma between looking at faces and not seeing faces, this game of speeches where political correctness is appealed to, makes us understand that every society establishes a system of meanings that, ultimately, is a system of recognition, a kind of brotherhood of the equals, of those who share the mask, worse still the club of those who, responding to the check-list of the official ideological frameworks to which they are subjected by the hegemonic social ontology, or as Butler (2010) could somehow express, a society where the faces of those who must be answered and cared for are imposed.



The idea of responsibility with a few who are legitimized within the canons of the hegemonic referential framework, once again demands that one of the main discourses of power be taken into account, which has been duly accepted, and which raises the need for protection of the species rather than the individual. And it is that, power as an exercise tends to lead the possible behaviors and frame the correct place where individuals can act through a series of constituted categories, as denounced by Foucault (2000) when saying that by means of “methods that they allow meticulous control of the body’s operations, which guarantee the constant subjection of its forces and imposes on them a docility-utility relationship” (p. 141).

This docility-utility relationship is developed within those moral social frameworks, which in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, make it clear that for those who hold hegemonic power, suffering is the least important thing, but rather the important thing is in what place of classification we place them instead, because the frames make visible, humanize, give voice, but also dehumanize and condemn them to oblivion, indifference, and extermination. In others, as Butler (2010) states: “moral frameworks distinguish the lives that we can apprehend from those that we cannot” (p.17). All this discrimination then legitimized in a discourse of power where we no longer think only of the individual but of the community, not in the homo but in the habitat. Moreover, this scheme of categorization of humanity as a subject of law strengthens the theory of the *concepturus*. This term, according to Varsi (2017), refers to:

... an institution proper to inheritance law and, at present, it has come to settle doctrinally and jurisprudentially in comparative law that it has inheritance vocation, i.e., right to be heir or legatee. Such is the case contemplated by the codes of Germany, Bolivia, Colombia, Italy, and Venezuela (p. 220).

The *concepturus* shows once again how the individual loses his face and is diluted in the species, even worse in such a hegemonic discourse where humanity is an ideal legal being where the human genome is the patrimony of humanity and, as such, deserves the broadest protection, a proposal endorsed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for future generations and the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights. It is curious that the whole world is facing a palpable example of the exercise of power that Foucault (2000) had denounced at the time.

## From economic losses to the misfortune of morality that makes people invisible

Having established the existence of categories that humanize or dehumanize within the frameworks defined by the hegemonic groups, then it can be realized that the true misfortune of Covid-19 is that these frameworks have played with the vulnerability of that other, serving as a barrier that has stolen the right to even be worthy of recognition.

And the thing is, Covid-19 has generated all kinds of concerns that, within the hegemonic frameworks, have sought to question political action in some countries and regions, as can be read in the following extract from an article entitled: "Covid-19 in Latin America: political challenges, challenges for health systems and economic uncertainty".

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... The Latin American presidential tradition, the different presidents have assumed a high public exposure and a great role, as well as the direct direction of the coming crisis... in many cases they do not have a protective network as these countries do not have effective and efficient administrative and health systems. This extreme personalization in the direction of the crisis is a risky bet: on the one hand, it has the virtue of building easy leadership (...) on the other hand, it exposes the president to a clear risk: that, in case the situation worsens, all the wear and tear falls on them (Malamud and Núñez, 2020, p. 1).

This article shows where hegemonic morality invites us to look and that, at the same time, makes others invisible or denies them in this region, because in Latin America there are human groups that, displaced, eternally destitute, continue to seek new places and new opportunities, new frameworks. where they can exist, be recognized; however, it is curious how they have been denied and when some of these human groups dare to raise their voices, they have been violently silenced, vetoing their dignity as a person.

Those others are still the outcasts of a society that closes its eyes to the face of the peasant, indigenous, migrant, black, among others who today are outside the health, education, and social security systems, since they are not legitimate children of the dominant framework, although they are vulnerable, in fact, perhaps more vulnerable among the vulnerable. This is undeniably noted in the article that was published on the official page of UNICEF (2020) Costa Rica and where it is stated that:

In Latin America and the Caribbean, around 154 million boys and girls, more than 95 percent of those enrolled, are temporarily out of schools closed due to Covid-19, UNICEF reported today based on UNESCO<sup>2</sup> data (p.1).

Those brief lines of the UNICEF article clearly expose how the vulnerability of that other can only be noted if it is said or presented from the canons of discourse that the dominant frameworks have pre-established, this discourse does not necessarily restore dignity to that other, since it is still a figure and not a face.

The drama of the excluded is such that, although brilliant exits from the different power groups aimed, for example, to close schools and make children and young people take advantage of virtual learning platforms, the truth is that this measure only evidenced the very poor and worn out of the public education systems of the Latin American and Caribbean regions that continue to lag behind for several decades, because as expressed in the UNICEF publication (2020):

Approximately 90 percent of early childhood, primary and secondary schools in Latin America and the Caribbean will be closed for the next few days or weeks, and the percentage is growing rapidly. This situation, which could extend beyond what was initially proposed, will increase the risk of permanent school dropout, especially for the most vulnerable boys and girls (p.1).

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It is necessary to emphasize what is expressed in the last line of the paragraph of the cited article; ‘Most vulnerable boys and girls’. However, the question that hegemonic morality asks is not whether there is a vulnerable or suffering someone, but rather what is the one who suffers, is he or she is not a person, is or is not a citizen, is or is not similar to me. Depending on the answer, Butler (2010) states, “morality will decide whether that life should be mourned, because from a moral point of view life and death always exist in relation to a certain framework” (p. 22). Worse still, it’s not just about how they catalog you, but it even limits the person’s existence.

## From categorical invisibility to exist with meaning

The existence validated by hegemonic frameworks is limited to categorically and conceptually defined limits, that is, and paraphrasing Butler (2010), the frameworks are those that decide on the lives that are worthy of mourning, those that are livable or normal. This experience of visibility, during this pandemic, is what makes it legitimate for some subjects to be considered citizens of law, and it is that within the frameworks in which they have been circumscribed, their existence, their personhood, their category of being have been validated. But a great majority remain

invisible even when the discourse of the public sphere speaks of them permanently, although without them.

The hegemonic public sphere is constituted by what appears, by what is represented, by what is considered, at a given moment, real. But, at the same time, as Butler (2014) warns, there is also in this same sphere of representation a concealment, a disinterest, a forgetfulness, an indifference, a denial, a prohibition to receive the benefits of the different social systems or the safeguards that states and agencies have provided for legitimate citizens.

In this way, the discourse of the public sphere becomes a key piece for the conception of the human being and it is that, plagued by categorical frameworks that validate the structures of power, the philosophical language becomes half stale, funereal, and therefore an accomplice. It is distracted in nominal discussions, limiting its actions to academic or discursive spaces, making the human experience a simple narrative where what is really worrisome is in the correct use of categorical language and where concrete existence becomes narrative, news or at worst of the cases a 'meme'. And it is that, consequently with the above, it is inevitable to recognize, as expressed by Wojtyła (2005), the philosophical and scientific tradition, have made the reflection on the human being a nominal situation extrinsic to himself, where they have placed him as one more object in the world to which he belongs.

The ideas of Wojtyła (2005) allow us to deduce that objectivity understood in this way leads to a reduction or fractionation of the person, so that everything that can be valued for the sake of autonomy and uniqueness is vexed, thereby denying all possibility of a real assessment of subjectivity that is synonymous with the unrepeatable of the human person, as expressed by Ortega (2009): "the human person is subjective, but at the same time the affirmation of his subjectivity is the objective, inasmuch as each person is objectively a unique and unrepeatable existence that lives its concrete existence from its subjectivity" (p. 170).

Then, it is mandatory to break with these ontologies that exalt the categorial-nominal as the only way to apprehend the humanity of the person and enter into an ontology of existence that challenges to value singularity, that is, to stop looking at faces and looking at that face that demands a response from us, a proper name, an encounter with the vulnerability of the other. And it is that in the experience of vulnerability and suffering, as expressed by Cavarero (2009):

The victim always has a name, although horror has wanted to erase it.  
The victim is not something but someone. It is certainly not a matter



of inventing a new language, but of showing that it is the vulnerability of the defenseless as a specific epochal paradigm that must come to the fore in current scenes (p.12).

This position of recognizing the other, of feeling challenged, goes beyond a mere act of talking about something, but rather it is about talking to a someone who happens, who breaks the identity of the self, the solipsism of reason, the egocentricity of the self, self-sufficiency. This encounter goes beyond what is categorical, because as noted in Levinas's (1994) proposal, it occurs as the unraveling of the self and the world, it is the impossibility of understanding, it is the vertigo of meaning, it is the appropriate response that it never really is.

This encounter can only occur in existence. But if the limit experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has taught something, it is that the isolation that we live today is not only corporeal but ethical, since it has revealed the magnitude of the marginality in which the other lives, condemned to a rejected existence or, rather, meaningless from the hegemonic frameworks.



## From the meaning of existence to postmodern egocentric existence

In general, it has been accepted —almost unanimously— that existence occurs with a meaning; indeed, it has come to identify two major positions in this regard, which are not discussed in depth in this document, but which should not therefore be left out. The first, which is the most common, is the one that refers to all the work of Frankl (1993) and where it establishes that the way of facing each specific situation is subject to factors external to the subject. The second position, on the contrary, which is presented by Sartre (1993), refers to the fact that it is oneself who invents the meaning of his own existence.

Although both positions seem very different, the truth is that the meeting point is that the experience of the personal situation is non-transferable. In the words of Sartre (1993): “the situation of each subject is presented as unique, without the possibility of being compared with that of another, each person only realizes one situation: his own” (p. 573).

This idea of living or experiencing one's life cannot be understood from the exclusionary, the solipsistic, but must be understood in responsibility always in response and encounter. However, as Mejía (2010) states: “Postmodern man (...) it is enough for him to enjoy the reality of the

limited present; what is important is what each one thinks, feels, needs, believes, seeks, experiences, even if this is provisional, momentary, partial” (p. 70).

But, going a little further, it is possible to realize that this postmodern subject is a constant seeker of his own individual satisfaction that is born from his exacerbated love of himself and, paradoxically, it can be verified, at the level of experience, that what this subject lacks most is self-love. Worse still, this postmodern subject has not understood that every question about the meaning of his life is also a question about the relationship with another and, on the contrary, has been plunged into confusion and that, in turn, has left him in the hands of the insecurity of not knowing oneself and of not knowing oneself as unique. Bauman (2006) will say about the postmodern subject:

(...) The ability to “go shopping” at the identity supermarket and the degree of freedom –genuine or putative- of the consumer to choose an identity and keep it for as long as they wish, becomes the royal road towards the realization of fantasies of identity.

(...) In a consumer society, sharing the dependence on consumption - the universal dependence on shopping - is the condition *sine qua non* of all individual freedom; above all, of the freedom to be different, to have an identity (p. 90).

If something has also made the Covid-19 pandemic very clear, it is this hedonistic state of self-preservation that is rooted in a poor, famished, and traditional ethic. The postmodern human being experiences his vulnerability not as a mostly humanizing encounter experience, but rather that he locks himself in such a state of hysteria that he does not recognize the other but as an enemy, like that other who can take away the last roll of toilet paper on the supermarket shelf.

On the last lines of the previous paragraph, and although it may sound ridiculous and absurd, in an investigative report by Bryan Lufkin and which appeared on March 10 on the BBC website, the following was narrated:

In Auckland, New Zealand, supermarket spending soared 40% last Saturday compared to the same day in 2019. Shoppers in Malaysia have caused an 800% increase in weekly antibacterial gel sales. All of these countries have confirmed cases of Covid-19 (Lufkin, 2020).

While it is true that it is about explaining this behavior from the psychological field, it is also true that selfish reactions have evidenced an ethical crisis in postmodern human beings. This ethical crisis by ignoring



the central value of the human being has eaten away the foundations of a society that, accustomed to corruption scandals and embezzlement at local, state, governmental, and regional levels, is distracted on stages, programs, and shows, that, paraphrasing Butler (2014), have been created to continue to maintain the concealment and disinterest of other lives, of other bodies, of other stories and in return to concentrating on the satisfaction of our own needs.

## From the health struggle to the recognition of a humanizing existential ontological encounter

Following the order of ideas up to this point developed, it becomes preponderant to analyze what happens in the public sphere and how a politically correct, but inhumanly exclusive discourse continues to be handled. In this sense, it is not surprising to hear that governments have made an effort to permanently present figures on their actions as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. For example, some speeches show how more than 90% of state or national organizations and private companies have taken prevention measures for Covid-19 and that, of these, perhaps more than 50% gave their authorization for their collaborators to carry out teleworking from their homes.

What's more, you may have also heard that some of these companies have tried to provide gel, alcohol and raise awareness about continuous hand washing. Also, as a series of surveys and studies carried out with experts, has yielded results like that. For example, 60% of experts surveyed about the economic repercussions of Covid-19 believe that the pandemic will affect companies very deeply. Meanwhile, 36% assure that it will only be moderate, while for 5% it will not affect economically.

On the other side, the sensationalist and destabilizing discourse is also used, such as those that in the mass media denounce the incompetence of pseudo leaders who, in the face of the pandemic, have been unable to enforce the correct measures internationally prescribed, in this sense articles like the one published on April 17 on the official page of the Panama America newspaper (2020), will help to demonstrate this point:

The effects on the economy continue to be one of the main focuses of the pandemic, which could generate “another lost decade (...) between 2015 and 2025” in Latin America, as the director of the Western Hemisphere of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Thursday, Alejandro Werner (...) the economy of Latin America and the Caribbean



will decline by 5.2% this year due to the impact of the current health crisis, a decline deeper than that of the world economy, which will fall by 3%, according to the forecasts presented this week by the IMF (p. 1).

Speeches and news like these continue to make many people invisible because while the reader is distracted by numbers and percentages, it becomes impossible to ask about those who, throughout Latin America, try to earn a living from their home despite not having social security that shields them, even worse a regular job, a union that supports them, or in some cases, simple space to take shelter. But the masses are still being distracted with speeches such as the one offered by the Fitch rating agency and published in the Panama America newspaper (2020) that: “put seven countries in the region in a negative perspective for the first time as a result of the impact from Covid-19: Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, Panama, Aruba, Costa Rica, and Bolivia” (p. 1).

Discourse that is constructed and validated within a hegemonic framework of power, which makes it impossible for human beings to wonder about the children and young people who, trapped in an outdated educational system, have not been able to continue studying because, although they were sent to their homes, many of them live in places lacking electricity, internet or computers, and like these, many other examples remind more than again that preventive and protective measures were designed to help those who, within the hegemonic frameworks, hold the dignity of people, of citizens and that, unfortunately, backed by a liquid, self-centered and self-absorbed existence, only validate this system.

If this pandemic has shown something, it is, as Santamaría (2020) affirms:

...like any extreme situation, it forces us to think not only about the virus, it also pushes us to interpret the entire surrounding context (this global case), establishes non-obvious relationships (not only with medical science), and question the values about we who have raised the fragile human civilization. In fact, due to the situation itself, various ideals that have sustained our economy, our political institutions, our global relations, etc., seem to be shaking (p.1).

## In conclusion

Throughout all this reflection, it has been tried to support the need to recognize that, although it is true, everyone in this pandemic situation has experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, a situation of vulnerability, this



experience should be a first moment that invites each person to rethink their own life. Beyond that, a turning point that, by destabilizing outdated models, makes it possible to ask the question about the meaning of life and the place that the other occupies in that answer.

And it is that when demonstrating that vulnerability can be considered as a dialogic experience that interpellates the encounter and that demands humanization, it is also true that within the different categorical frameworks in which the hegemonic system places each human being, an ontological irruption from this experience of vulnerability must be provoked.

This ontology of vulnerability that, also endowed with epistemological possibility, fosters and learns the life that, although it is true, is lived related to the norms of subject production and recognition, must be a sufficient dialogical space that challenges hegemonic frameworks. Well, as Butler (2010) states: “the normative production of ontology produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life” (p. 16), which cannot be limited only to the order of perception or knowledge, without including the reciprocity of the recognition of the other, not as a reward but as a knowing again, as a sharing from the depth of existence. And it is that as Butler (2010) states in her work *Frames of war*:

If life is produced according to the norms by which life is recognized, this does not imply either that everything around life is produced according to those norms, nor that we should reject the idea that there is a rest of life —suspended and spectral— that describes and inhabits each case of normative life (p. 22).

Finally, and being clear that there is a possibility in an apex of suspended and spectral life, it is necessary to hold on to provoke an ontological irruption that challenges and rethinks life, ethics, and the meaning of existence in relation to another.

Overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic is not about returning to the ‘normality’ of life but, about learning it in such a way that it is possible to take advantage of the spectral spaces that are given or that are caused, to give voice to those who continue to remain outside the hegemonic frameworks; for if this brief moment in time is not taken advantage of, humanity will be left alone as a spectator; like those who, captivated by how nature has claimed spaces in the canals of Venice, begin to make plans to make a tourist visit and post the best photo in search of the most *likes*, but that will once again be the cause of the destruction of the ecosystems, there and in the rest of the common home, which has been called Earth.



## Notes

- 1 <https://who.maps.acgis.com/>
- 2 Unesco Institute of Statistics: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

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Document reception date: May 3, 2020  
 Document review date: June 15, 2020  
 Document approval date: August 20, 2020  
 Document publication date: January 15, 2021