

EDITORIAL

A year ago we noted that in 2024 a record number of countries for one year, seventy-four, would hold national elections. Outcomes, predictably, varied but an observable result was that an increase in polarisation and disinformation deepened national divisions. As we know, governments come and go and, notwithstanding various forms of compulsory voting, the older democracies showed lower voter turnout than the newer democracies. The latter seemed to have greater faith in the process. So what is going on, existentially? We can examine this by reflecting on how we think about time, about our development in history.

A dominant developmental theory in the Western world is that of linearity, or stage theory. This is derived from the Enlightenment narrative that reason, properly applied, leads to progress and hence an increased sense of purpose. It is an onwards and upwards, to infinity and beyond, model. Confidence in this model seems to have reduced because some in the West, having taken an increased sense of purpose for granted, now increasingly see purposelessness. This is reflected in the sentiment ‘they are all the same’ and in lower levels of voter turnout. This is a phenomenon of passivity, lack of agency, loss of faith. Perhaps the onwards and upwards theory of development has passed its best-by date, if it ever had one.

An alternative model might be derived from ancient Greek cosmology, in which the universe began with Chaos and was then followed by Cosmos. Chaos, in this context, denotes not randomness and meaninglessness, but that order is a material, physical order that is immune to human interference. It refers to the material givens, the laws of the universe, for example gravity, mortality, as well to as the existential givens. In the face of these we feel powerless and we have a reactive hubristic belief that our achievements, which are considerable, mean that, Icarus-like, we can ignore the givens.

Cosmos, on the other hand, is the sum total of our human response to Chaos. It involves agency and responsibility. As Heidegger reminds us, there is nothing inherently good or bad about technology, it is neutral. The important thing is what it does to us and what we do with it. The Oxford University Press 2024 word of the year is ‘brain-rot’. The more we think technologically the more the difference between good and bad disappears and the more that ethics becomes irrelevant. Chaos and Cosmos, in contrast, have an order, but not only are they different, they are constantly in tension. What we call history is what happens when the givens of existence, Chaos, meets human agency, Cosmos.

There is a dilemma here, that while imagination makes us human, we are also subject to the givens that inevitably limit the translation of imagination

into reality. Whether we like it or not, we are always in-the-world. Disregard this, and we become like Icarus who discovered the limitations of his knowledge too late.

The common denominator in Cosmos is that we are all involved in forming and maintaining cooperative human communities. We also know that this way of organising human life is the most beneficial. It is not only biologically advantageous but existentially it also gives us meaning; but this is only possible with faith. It is fragile though and it needs to be nurtured. Elections are a measure of the resilience of human communities and they are as existential as they are political. We all need to make an income and we can do this either by contributing to the world or by extracting from the world. The former reduces inequalities while the latter increases inequalities. Existentially, however, the wealthiest nations are not necessarily those with most financial power; these generally got where they are by extracting. The wealthiest nations are, arguably, those in which the members possess the most agency.

Change is often simultaneously desired and feared; there is always a tension between a need for newness and a need for predictability, and an increase in cultural unpredictability like a failure in the onwards and upwards model, leads to anxiety. Invariably, because the model is seen as fixed rather than made, that is, not a product of human agency, a malevolent cause, a culprit, an enemy, either within or without is sought. We see this in the way populism and totalitarianism thrives on polarisation and disinformation, a blurring of the lines between criminality and celebrity, between good and bad. It also manifests as a culture war against those who propose a different model of organisation and development, often targeting people who dare to call out inequality and hypocrisy. In this way minorities (in terms of power not necessarily numbers) can be smeared and silenced. In some contexts even identifying oneself as a moderate can be risky.

This is not new. In his account of the civil war in Corfu (472 BCE) Thucydides noted the first people to suffer were those who championed a mode of social organisation characterised by civility and compromise. These qualities became seen as vices, not virtues. We are constantly reminded of the climate crisis, but doing something about it that matters is more difficult. This is a reflection of the way people think about their own life, or rather do not think about it. And if you do not think about the fragility of your own life, you escape thinking about the fragility of Life.

So, how does one live in such conditions? There are a number of alternatives:

- We can ignore it and hope for the best. Put our heads in the sand and kick around on a piece of ground in our hometown, waiting for someone or something to show us the way.

- We can bemoan the passing of time and glorify the past. Simone de Beauvoir was clear where she stood. She argued that nostalgia is about the wish to return to childhood, for an imagined time of freedom without responsibility and the passivity of the hope that others will serve as a protection from the vicissitudes of existence. This is the myth of 'specialness'.
- We can indulge in despair, in the belief that resistance is futile. This akin to depression which is characterised by helplessness or a belief that one's fate is deserved.

Each of these is a variation on the same theme, the disengagement of personal and shared agency. This was not Simone de Beauvoir's option. She thought that there was really only one solution: to go on doing things that give meaning, devotion to people and to political, intellectual, or creative work, in the hope that it all make a difference.

But there is another alternative, to run alongside this one, and that is to will oneself to discover (or rediscover, for as adults we frequently forget it) the mystery and excitement of existence. Although we can be impressed, even bewitched, by a piece of technology and it can be life-affirming when we make something with our own hands, we can also find making something with our own hands life-affirming, we can also find ourselves reminded daily when we stop to pay attention that a flower, an earthworm, a cloud, is special, unique and utterly unfathomable in its everydayness and its 'is-ness'. The fact that we are privileged to share the world with them, that we are as valuable as they are, is what makes life, Life, our life, so exciting. If we were to do this more, then we would take more care of each other and the planet.

We are delighted to be able to open this number of the Journal with two papers based on presentations given at the Fifth European Conference for Existential Therapy, held in Istanbul in May 2024. These are followed by a paper based on a presentation given at the 2023 Society for Existential Analysis Annual Conference, and five papers from the Society's 2024 Conference. We conclude with a further four papers and, as ever, a selection of highly informative book reviews. Each of these contributions, in their own way, may be considered to be a response to the mystery and excitement of existence.

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