

BIG EVENTS, WILL AND THE QUEST FOR HUMAN AUTONOMY IN THE POSTPANDEMIC WORLD ¹

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Abstract: *The post-pandemic world is characterized by not only the recession of COVID-19, which continues to affect people's health worldwide, but also an escalation of anxieties and global threats that have been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and a surge in geopolitical conflicts. Thus, concepts such as "big Events," "the Age of Will," and the "phenomenologically perceived atmosphere" are useful. In an environment of anxiety and peril, traditional concepts of human autonomy, such as self-sufficiency or a self-contained, reflective monad, are rendered obsolete. Human conditionality, uncertainty, and spheres of influence continue to expand. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the pursuit of human autonomy, a fundamental tenet that is interwoven with good will. The notion of relational autonomy is critically examined because it lacks a universal ethical dimension, suggesting that true autonomy involves not isolation or inclusion into nets and projects but rather the adoption of an ethical stance within a community to safeguard human dignity and freedom.*

Keywords: *post-pandemic era, big Events, era of Will, warfare, phenomenology, hesitant atmosphere, autonomy*

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Big Events and the Era of Will

The early decades of the 21st century have unfolded contrary to the expectations of many people with a European perspective. Instead of ushering in an era of reason, peace, and prosperity, the war in Ukraine erupted, sparked by the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022—a conflict that arguably began in 2014 with the occupation of Crimea. The war in Ukraine is sometimes seen as having minor significance, merely “the failure of two Slavic nations to divide their territory after the collapse of the USSR”—a narrative propagated by Russian ideologues. However, this is an inaccurate characterization because the war encompasses broad issues of values and ways of life, and it has a global impact. Therefore, it qualifies as a big event and is one of the great world-changing events.

Furthermore, in the third decade of the 21st century, instead of welcoming progressive health advancements through new pharmacological and technological innovations, the world faced the onset of COVID-19, a novel virus that initially had no known treatments and continues to challenge humanity.¹ COVID-19 is considered a global event, despite the decline of the pandemic, because it has changed the experience of time, place, communication, laws, and values. The climate crisis, viewed from a global and even cosmological perspective, is also notable as a tremendous process—a Big Event on a global scale. From a phenomenological standpoint, our perception of the world is changing significantly in terms of meanings and praxis, so a fresh perspective and reinterpreted concepts are needed.

This article examines personal autonomy within three broader reinterpreted concepts: *Big Events*, the *Age of Will*, and an *atmosphere of hesitancy*, aiming for phenomenological intuition. Eco-phenomenological concepts² such as “enchantment of life,” “unity-of-everything-that-is-alive,” “being-together-with-the-living-world,” “everything-that-is-alive,” and “telos,” are proposed to enhance the phenomenological understanding of humans amidst current and future Big Events. The framework for examining these concepts is phenomenological as a description of changes in the forms of life (Küle 2018: 43–58, 2022: 3–24; Buceniece 2022: 43–63).

The current post-pandemic scenario should not be misconstrued as merely the ebbing of COVID-19 but rather as a period marked by heightened anxieties and threats, fueled by consequential Events. These Events include the continuing impact of the pandemic, the proximity of war in Europe, escalating tensions in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Israeli–Iranian 12 days war, and the looming threat to Taiwan and other global alarming events.³ This acknowledgment underscores the reality that global conflict

¹ In May 2023, the World Health Organization declared that the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer a global health emergency. Latvia, along with all Baltic and Eastern European states, followed suit, and pandemic-era precautions, patient enumeration for COVID-19, and public communication about vaccination have been rendered obsolete since 2023 (e. g. see data at COVID19.gov.lv).

² Latvian, Lithuanian, Italian, American, and Hungarian authors conducted an eco-phenomenological analysis of life forms during the pandemic in the collective book ‘The Development of Eco-Phenomenology as An Interpretative Paradigm of the Living World: Applications in Pandemic Times’ (*Analecta Husserliana* 2022).

³ Statista Infographic Newsletter provides a map of the world at war in 2023, and not only the abovementioned countries are in danger of armed clashes. A large part of the world map is painted in a red

hotspots are proliferating rather than decreasing. The dragon of evil grows. Human conditionality, uncertainty, and spheres of influence expand. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the pursuit of human autonomy, a fundamental tenet that is interwoven with good will. Surprisingly, despite the onset of major geopolitical shifts since the 1980s, neither Europe's leading intellectuals nor national governments anticipated the scale of cataclysms that would define the 21st century—namely, the significant Events and the resultant atmospheres that demand a global communicative response (Ayodele et al., 2024). The discourse on future war in Europe, particularly its philosophical dimensions and the imperative of European military preparedness, has been notably absent in philosophical thought (1960-2020) and has instead been relegated to historical analyses rather than recognized as a pressing contemporary issue (Thys 2023).

The prevailing atmosphere in the West spread the cultivation of desires and the satisfaction of personal wishes within European liberal democracies, where educational philosophies and societal accolades often emphasized nonconfrontational, pleasurable experiences over the preparation for or acknowledgement of potential threats and totalitarian advances in other parts of the world. An impressive book, “Civilization and Barbarism in the Age of Global Crises,” was published in Moscow in 2011 by one of the best-known professors of Russian academic philosophy, Prof. Nelly Motroshilova; however, it did not provide a notable global warning of the danger to the future in Russia.

Interestingly, cultural outputs such as cinema and literature have occasionally offered more prescient insights into the nature of Great evil, portraying it as a constant threat through metaphorical characters such as Sauron and Voldemort. However, such narratives have largely been regarded as mere fiction, not as cautionary tales reflective of real-world dangers, including the potential use of nuclear weaponry.

Consequently, the post-pandemic world of Western countries finds itself in a state of philosophical disorientation, with uncertainty becoming a predominant force. Zygmunt Bauman's reflections on “uncertain certainty” in the 1990s presciently described the markets as thriving on uncertainty; now, they are a feeding ground for further uncertainties (Bauman 1999: 31).

This article concludes with insights into autonomy conceptualization amidst big Events, underscoring *the very conditioned nature* of contemporary individual, human existence. The pandemic has challenged individuals to reassess their core values, particularly those of personal survival. The same is true for the war and the dangers posed by the climate crisis. Life on Earth is in danger, and a hesitant atmosphere has started to prevail, despite various commitments to change the global course. Hesitancy, which was discussed in the context of non-vaccination, needs to be seen more broadly, it has become an indicator of individual attitudes with fluid meanings and positions.

However, there is one more important issue—big Events highlight the necessity of collective action and responsible decision-making, both nationally and globally, for the survival of all nations and humanity. War kills not only bodies but also nations (for

color, which indicates danger (see the map at <https://www.statista.com/chart/21652/countries-with-armed-clashes-reported/>).

example, destroying Ukrainians as a nation and Ukraine *as a state* is mentioned in Russian ideology). The goal of action here takes an evil form not only in the sense of conflicting political values but also even more in the sense of realization of metaphysical evil (Küle 2022).

In the tumultuous atmosphere of the pandemic and military conflicts, the impacts on individual autonomy and the integrity of the self are profound. The prevailing existential unease, fueled by manipulative media, misleading language, societal pressures, and the dictates of power—whether from political elites or economic forces—raises critical questions about the preservation of personal freedom and core identity. People worry about their individual right to decide about their own bodies and lives, the human right to oppose state decisions, and the right to live an individual style without putting the common good first, pledging to die for the country. Amidst this, as Heidegger articulates, individuals find themselves “thrown” into existence, with their actions and decisions influenced by a historical context and Big Events they did not choose. Events choose them. Humans increasingly feel like a reed in a storm.

A similar situation has occurred in this war, except for some Russian political and military leaders who chose to start it and were the main actors. People *are thrown* into the war; that is, with media activity, many are interwoven in the atmosphere of the Russia–Ukraine war. Information warfare dominates everywhere. Imperial ideology encourages people to choose the active side of war, not to hesitate but to join the fight. Part of Russian society believes in the need for war, part makes money, part doesn't know how to escape or keep silent, and a minority emigrates. Interestingly, money plays a crucial role; for example, the payment of warriors in Russia can exceed ten times their civilian salaries. The life of a soldier has become a commodity. While the pandemic has rendered many aspects of life absurd, war amplifies this absurdity even further.

Is any human autonomy possible in an absurd situation? In Kierkegaard's contemplation in “Fear and Trembling” on the biblical narrative of Abraham's commanded sacrifice of his son, we encounter a profound meditation on human autonomy, faith, hesitance, and absurdity. Abraham's journey, marked by intense inner turmoil and isolation from the consolations of human counsel or familial support, embodies the quintessence of an autonomous spirit. He was ready to follow God's command, which seems absurd. However, he went to the land of Moriah, and at the top of the mountain, he was ready to kill his son until an angel stopped his hand. Abraham did not hesitate or postpone the decision to fulfill God's will, and this turned out to be the right way—that of absolute faith in God. Therefore, the angel gave a ram instead of a son. Absurdity did not win because Abraham did not waver.

The peril of procrastination, sway, and hesitancy is characteristic of many people, but autonomy cannot grow out of hesitancy; a firm, immediate decision is needed. This involves clarity on values, the enchantment of life, and the unity-of-everything-that-is-alive. While killing affects the body, the Christian philosopher's focus is not on the body but on the state of the soul. The relief of speech is that it translates Abraham into the universal.

Kierkegaard suggests that examining his ordeal elevates Abraham to achieve a form of autonomy that transcends reason, personal will, speech, and communal interaction. This silent, solitary confrontation with a divine command reflects an inward-focused search for autonomy that is deeply inwards-focused, where decision-making is underpinned not by choosing between options but by an intense, unwavering faith in God. Today, in secular societies, we are able to interpret God as the highest value. Here, the highest level of autonomy appears, with one case, one moment, and one decision, which can lead to clarity for life and permission to live for others and for peace.

In contrast, the atmosphere surrounding contemporary Big Events—the pandemic, war, and geopolitical conflicts—is largely secular and navigated by powerful entities such as the World Health Organization and national governments, albeit with religious figures such as the Pope endorsing vaccination efforts. However, modern societal norms deviate markedly from Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of autonomy. The current social fabric is woven with the threads of outspokenness, the ubiquity of social media, and a pervasive culture of public discourse characterized by noise and “spectacle” (Guy Debord). This starkly contrasts with the introspective, silent autonomy that Kierkegaard describes. Kierkegaard describes the ideal form in the context of the absurd, yet today’s secular consumer society is drowning in the infinity of choices and uncertainty, so in the case of Big Events, people are late, engaging in long discussions, manipulating, and hesitating. The current ideology in Russia is an example of how to make noise, along with global unrest and a loss of humanity.

Possible re-evaluations are imperative for understanding the complexities of autonomy, power, and individual agency in the face of overwhelming global challenges. If there is no concept of a free subject, it is difficult to talk about autonomy. Thus, Roberto Esposito (2023) proposes that Michel Foucault’s discourse on biopower needs to be reinterpreted within the modern context of pervasive Will.

Will is a concept that needs to be introduced more broadly into our understanding of current Big Events. In my opinion, we are witnessing the dawn of *the Age of Will*, superseding the Enlightenment’s era of Reason. The Age of Will is a designation for the tendencies that direct global activities. This era is characterized by various forms of increasing power—governmental, political, military, ideological, economic, and financial—that are collectively referred to as “Will” and the individual psychological drive or “will.” The *Will wants*, i.e., moves the tendencies of processes. We use the concept “Will” with the capital letter to emphasize its connection with the great Events, where these processes are formed by the interrelation of many wills. At the individual level, will is described as a person’s capacity for wishing and choosing. Each individual perceives themselves on the horizon of the world’s Big Events, emphasizing that there is an atmosphere of uncertainty, different ideologies, and the Will based on the manifestations of global powers. Human autonomy has therefore become more limited, but it should not be philosophically abandoned: the life force of individuals, in principle, can shape a better world.

The role of ideologies that influence people’s self-understanding and feelings about their bodies is growing every decade. The current Russian ideology is a prime

example of this, with concepts such as “a dragon that does not collect golden things but eats bodies.” The military threats from Russia to European nations underscore the urgency of defense and deterrence, marking a stark departure from reasoned diplomacy and reflection. Russia’s aggressive stance, driven by a desire to reclaim past imperial glory, exemplifies this shift towards a *Will to power*, denying that international treaties and states accepted borders.

This transition from reason and knowledge to a dominion ruled by willpower marks a significant shift in global dynamics. The era of Will is not conducive to debate or diplomacy; instead, it is defined by an assertive, sometimes irrational, pursuit of objectives regardless of potential consequences. Historical periods dominated by Will have often been revolutionary yet inherently destructive.

The diminished influence of Reason in contemporary discourse has led many philosophers to explore the depths of sensuality, wishes, and pleasures instead of engaging with the rigid frameworks of Reason, as seen in the centuries past of transcendental philosophy and classical idealism. The deep Western philosophy of history is absent; many philosophers avoid seeing large historical trends and are afraid of “global history”, Eurocentrism, and a view of the future. The shift from a “critique of the pure mind” to a focus on the “impure body” marks a transformation in philosophical priorities, where the pursuit of autonomy as an ethical activity with universal implications is being overshadowed by plural identities, multiple choices in social nets, hesitancy and an aversion to making definitive good, ethical choices. The European slogan of the greatness of diversity allows many things to be expressed, but it is not as appropriate as is claimed when the age of Will clashes. Diversity can be seen as an aesthetic treasure, even beautiful and humane, but it has no power. Diversity does not negotiate. Will does not have to try to agree with anything, it just wants...! This is the philosophical picture that can be painted if one accepts the hypothesis of the coming of the age of Will.

Philosopher Andrius Bielskis, among others, downplays the universal significance of Kant’s categorical imperative, considering it merely a genealogical precursor to the laws of a liberal state, articulated through the protection of citizens via human rights doctrine. He interprets the “autonomy of the *a priori* practical reason of an enlightened individual, who is the bourgeois as an ideal type” (Bielskis 2023: 25). By employing a narrative mixing technique, the universal ethical perspective is weakened, and the connection to the socioeconomic class of the bourgeois clouds the potential for philosophical autonomy. Good and evil have become relative; therefore, volatility overpowers choice. Metaphorically, we might say that the era of Will merely wishes Kant dead!

In the shadow of the pandemic and the looming specter of conflict, indecision has become increasingly prevalent among individuals, driven by a preference to wait rather than risk making erroneous decisions. The burden of ultimate responsibility for autonomous choices fosters a pervasive sense of fear and desperation, casting doubt on the feasibility of autonomy. Hesitation often stems from a prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty characterized by a lack of self-confidence, a dread of making errors and facing risks, and the anxiety of encountering opposition or rejection. Over time, however,

experiences may mitigate these hesitations, especially as the collective atmosphere shifts, highlighting situations where indecision becomes perilous (such as in warfare, where it is said that the safer option might be to flee).

Amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, NATO's strategy of deterrence aims to prevent further Russian aggression. Although these dynamics unfold on a global stage, their essence—*avoidance and deterrence*—mirrors individual choices, impacting the collective atmosphere. This, in turn, influences many individuals, casting doubt on their autonomy's viability. In this climate, opting out becomes the preferred choice compared to active participation. Consequently, only a minority emerge as heroes, while the majority remain on the sidelines, illustrating the broader implications of these global processes for personal autonomy and societal engagement.

This growing insecurity profoundly affects individuals' perceptions of their autonomy and freedom. The emergence of “hesitant bodies,” characterized by deep-seated uncertainty and anxiety, signifies a shift in societal dynamics. The pandemic, the conflict initiated by Russia in Ukraine, and the climate crisis have relegated many people to a state of passive subjugation. Individuals are transformed into “waiting bodies”—whether as anti-vaccination proponents during the pandemic or as mere *spectators of war* through media consumption, passively absorbing (sometimes even enthusiastically!) a narrative shaped by imperial Russian ideology. In Russia, this passive audience, prevented from protesting, represents something that is not a society. We interpret the majority of Russian people today not as “society” but as a “public”—an audience subjected to an ideologized spectacle of war, rather than civil society (Küle 2022b). Apparent “autonomy” in this atmosphere means silencing, hiding, and waiting, rather than engaging in active decision-making for protest against the war. This involves not the *homo faber* but the *homo qui vitat*. Notably, approximately 30% of people in Russian society exhibit a growing desire for brutal activity. The subconscious urge to kill is specifically brought to the surface through ideology, to be harnessed as a force for the sustainability of imperial power.

A large part of Russian society is practicing a life course in a *waiting room*, contemplating what happens next and deciding what position to take. In such an atmosphere, the appearance of autonomy is reduced to inaction; instead of protesting, there is silencing, concealment, and a *perpetual state of waiting*, reminiscent of a nomadic existence, marked by senseless changes and isolation. Of course, we must acknowledge the Ukrainian soldiers who went to the front with determination and personal resolve to die for their country, along with their many supporters.

Activists overtaken by Russian ideology are showing a different kind of activity, advocating for increased violence and the occupation of Ukraine. However, in this context, we should acknowledge the tendency of many to abstain, refrain from participation, and wait, which is a stable and even growing trend. Therefore, a mass revolt against imperial power in Russia is currently impossible.

The narrowing of the soul and bodily autonomy occurs in yet another way. COVID-19, as a biological catalyst for global disruption, has had profound social and cultural impacts. Philosopher Tomas Kačerauskas highlights the dialectic between openness and

isolation brought about by the pandemic, wherein the loss of bodily autonomy to the confines of consumerist entertainment becomes evident. In his opinion, quarantine was a test of democracy when we are enclosed at home and privacy outweighs publicity (Kačerauskas 2022: 268). Thus, the pandemic serves as a litmus test for democracy, challenging societal values under the constraints of quarantine, where the concept of *home as autonomy* is revealed as an illusion fostered by the era of Will. Ukraine's example of preserving democratic procedures during the war is surprising and even risky, but it is the desire to maintain the democratic politics of future Ukraine as part of the EU with free choice and individual responsibility that allows the *social space to function as a home*.

The intermingling of biological existence with social constructs, rationality with irrationality, and causality with contingency illustrates a broader subjugation to state authority and medical governance—a manifestation of biopower. Biopower has become a popular concept in pandemic analysis and is valuable for examining war. This concept has a long history; Foucault expanded its use, and Esposito currently demonstrates how to apply the concepts of “immunization,” “communities,” “inequality,” and “biopolitics” not for medical reasons, but rather to expose the negative aspects of capitalism that deepen inequality during the pandemic.

The subjective experience of Big Events, characterized by pervasive fear, confusion, and often-paralyzing inability to make decisive choices, diverges greatly from the objective strategies used in crisis management. Researchers (Vēgners, 2024) have captured this dichotomy, noting the abstract nature of COVID-19 compared to the tangible immediacy of war, which highlights the varied dimensions of existential threats perceived by individuals.

The perspective of the American-Lithuanian philosopher Algis Mickunas on the clash between traditional Russian autocracy and modern Western democracy highlights a fundamental conflict of values and governance models. Mickunas notes the magnetic, noncoercive influence of Western democracy as a stark contrast to the force-driven ethos of autocratic regimes (Mickunas, 2022: 59–60, 69–73). This distinction underscores a broader cultural and political divide, where the dynamics of Will, as a manifestation of power, have reshaped societal structures and individual lives. In autocratic contexts, Will dictates the terms of life, introducing challenges that demand less rational deliberation and more submissive conformity. Conversely, consumer societies experience life as a series of choices, often devoid of the existential weight that characterizes existence under the shadow of the autocratic Will. This analysis reflects the divergent paths of human experience shaped by the dominant forces of the era, whether those of Will, force, and power, or the seemingly benign yet equally compelling forces of consumer choice and democratic freedom.

Atmosphere Created by Events

Phenomenologically, the essence of an Event can be conceptualized as fostering a unique *atmosphere*, a notion deeply embedded in the realms of phenomenological aesthetics, as discussed by Gernot Böhme (1993) and explored by Māra Rubene (2022). The concept of

the atmosphere is worth developing further in philosophy. This perspective on the affective turn proves invaluable for understanding the pervasive and immersive sensory phenomenological experiences triggered by global phenomena, such as pandemics, the climate crisis, and war. The atmosphere evoked by significant events envelops consciousness in a metaphorical “fog” (or covers everything as “*air*”), permeating every aspect of existence, regardless of one’s desires. People “breathe” the atmosphere; it resembles an *aura* (Böhme 1993: 5–6). To perceive the atmosphere means to absorb it involuntarily into one’s bodily state of being. Böhme builds on Hermann Schmitz’s philosophy of the body and atmosphere when he articulates that “atmospheres are affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods” (Böhme 1993: 7). Atmosphere creates an indeterminate, spatially extended quality of feeling.

The atmosphere is not a direct determining factor or cause but rather functions as a “wrapper,” an “influencer,” and a condition that cannot be avoided. Regardless of how autonomous a person may feel, they are influenced by the atmosphere of the Event. In the case of significant Events, the atmosphere creates a layer so profound that it becomes global, affecting all the inhabitants of the Earth.

Military battles, threats, and media coverage surrounding them foster a warlike atmosphere. This pervasive presence transcends observable reality, manifesting as a visceral, indefinable sentiment that is often difficult to articulate, and it embeds within it negativity, peril, and the overwhelming forces exerted upon individuals and the collective psyche. This reflects the post-pandemic situation, the war in Ukraine, a “waiting world,” a policy of restraint, the passivity of individuals, and the fear among Western political leaders to strongly oppose Russian aggression.

The protracted political disputes regarding whether the weapons supplied to Ukraine by the West and the US can be used beyond Ukraine’s borders in the war against Russia, along with political indecision, shortages of military equipment, and supply gaps (Posaner et al. 2024), as well as the blurring of diplomatic language, all contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty in the 2020s. Phenomenologists examine hesitant bodies due to the reluctance surrounding the displaced appearance of the Coronavirus.

It is in the body that the invisible becomes visible. Thus, the spatial displacement of the virus’s appearance means that what appears to be outside is, in reality, inside when it has entered my body. (Vēgners 2022: 237–243)

My hesitancy to become ill is influenced by my body’s sensations and understanding.

However, the concept of hesitancy can be applied to a much broader range in contemporary situations: hesitancy exists in politics, the military, the definition of identities and borders, and in broken promises; it is increasing in interpersonal relationships and international politics.

Thus, this atmospheric quality of an Event is understood as an amplification and broadening of sensory engagement—a boundless realm of emotional resonance that, while historically contingent and mutable, serves as a “super horizon” or the “horizon of all horizons.” It encapsulates both angst and anticipation.

However, it can also be otherwise, with happy intent, as shown in, for example, the general atmosphere of *the Baltic Way* Event, with the collective hope and vision for the future of the Baltic states shared by the 400,000 participants in 1989 standing in one line for freedom (the Baltic). This was a major political, cultural, and moral Event with an atmosphere of joy for the possibility of freedom.

The notion of “atmosphere” is reconceived as an experiential, rather than analytical, mode of understanding that is rooted in the phenomenological familiarity of practical existence and experienced through bodily intuitive senses. It can be described by phenomenological intuition without the quantification of data, as big Events appear through the atmosphere. Parallel concepts include Heidegger’s *Befindlichkeit*, Deleuze’s *haecceity*, and Husserl’s *Horizon*, but the atmosphere is distinguished by its encompassing, reflective nature, often evoking profound emotional responses such as pervasive anxiety or a numbed state in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Such an atmosphere can immobilize individuals’ capacity for action, decision-making, and resistance, casting them into states of hesitation, confusion, or metaphorical stasis, particularly in contexts where decisive responses are essential, such as vaccination during a pandemic. The complex factors that contribute to this hesitancy, each unique and multifaceted, warrant further exploration. We do not create an atmosphere ourselves but are drawn into it; the environment exudes a certain mood, and the human being participates in this mood with his or her own sensitivity and affectivity.

The concept of “atmosphere” metaphorically describes an omnipresent yet vague influence that shapes perceptions and reactions without providing a definitive stance, instead manifesting through an internally meaningful response. Thus, this concept becomes a pivotal addition to the phenomenological lexicon in response to significant events, capturing the essence of pervasive emotional saturation and the encompassing nature of collective experience. From a phenomenological perspective, the atmosphere is regarded as a fundamental truth, elusive to verbal expression or sociological measurement, yet forming a critical backdrop for understanding, influencing decisions, and actions. As Costa et al. aptly note, “... atmospheres are felt as affects originating from outside the subject’s boundaries” (Costa et al. 2014: 352).

The pandemic, as an omnipresent disturbance akin to Karl Jaspers’ concept of the “border situation”, parallels the pervasive impact of the war in Ukraine, with both events profoundly limiting personal autonomy and freedom of movement, including crossing the state and regional borders. As a result, dependency prevails. This environment significantly influences individuals’ psychological and emotional well-being, further complicating the collective experience of global crises. The atmosphere, marked by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, disrupts and disorients, eroding individuals’ sense of autonomy.

Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret, in their analysis of COVID-19 as “*der grosse Umbruch*” (the big upheaval), identified six dimensions of upheaval—economic, social, geopolitical, ecological, technological, and industrial—underscoring the pandemic’s extensive impact (Schwab & Malleret 2020: 40–203, 224–251). Their discourse urges a re-evaluation of humanity itself (*Menschlichkeit*), questioning what we see in Man—the

good angel or the devil (Teufel) (Schwab & Malleret 2020: 252–267). By employing metaphorical language, they assert that the atmosphere of this era is conveyed through symbolic concepts, suggesting a shift from tangible realities to more abstract, emotional interpretations.

The dialectical principle that negativity persists, and that “evil forces,” once eliminated, do not immediately vanish, has been forgotten in many philosophical teachings today. This represents a flaw in philosophical reasoning. The war in Ukraine, the climate crisis, and the pandemic have returned people to a sense of danger and an increasingly evil atmosphere. Some forms of evil never diminish, so a metaphysical explanation is needed. Thus, philosophy must return to the question of people’s place in the world and the possibility of autonomy and free will.

The Current Quest for Human Autonomy

When considering the evaluation of situations, understanding processes, and making decisions, human autonomy encompasses a philosophically richer and more complex dimension. Autonomy is manifested through human interaction, encompassing both thought processes and acts of will. On one hand, the pandemic has fostered a surge in autonomous tendencies by challenging fundamental human values such as freedom and personal survival. On the other hand, it also underscores the necessity of collective action and responsible decision-making at both the societal and global levels for survival (Küle 2018).

In the context of war, military personnel operate under a strict hierarchy that limits personal autonomy, whereas civilians are compelled to navigate personal decisions amid uncertainty and tragedy. Thus, autonomy is influenced by various factors, including the prevailing atmosphere, social structures, power, and an individual’s freedom to think, move, feel, and understand. Apart from all other determining factors, autonomy is constrained by the Big Events in which people find themselves, over which they have no control. Individuals are influenced by the atmosphere created by these events and by the life forms dictated by the age of the Will.

Humans are beings shaped by conditions. In the face of prevailing uncertainty, the reality is that individuals are not entirely free subjects but are conditioned by historical, linguistic, physical, and sociopolitical forces, including biopower, political authority, medical protocols, scientific research, info-war, media influences, etc. From a phenomenological perspective, the ongoing shifts in how individuals perceive their autonomy, the dynamics among reason, will, emotions, and faith, and the interplay among the forces of will, self-reliance, and conformity are crucial.

During the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, alongside the looming threat of war expansion and the need to safeguard Europe against potential Russian aggression, the populace’s sense of personal autonomy has notably diminished, resulting in confusion, anxiety, and psychological distress. While anti-vaccination groups initially garnered attention, the growing fear has led people to view the state more favorably or

with uncertainty, questioning what it can do for them and how it can help in the face of Big Events.

In daily life, truly autonomous decisions are rare; they are often unnecessary, as life revolves around communication, coordination, and mutual influence to achieve objectives. For Hegel, attaining autonomy is the culmination of a rigorous quest for recognition, suggesting that autonomy is realized only after traversing various developmental stages. This process involves emerging from a phase of “undifferentiated” engagement with others to a stage where the individual is recognized as autonomous by others.

Kantian autonomy emphasizes reason and a strong, virtuous will, contrasting sharply with heteronomy, which leans towards desires, needs, and interests. Autonomy, in its Kantian essence, arises from decisions made during moments of personal choice, epitomized by the categorical imperative—an ethical, pure form that demands action not from inclination but from duty. Conversely, heteronomy involves external influences, demands, and impositions that entangle the decision-maker within a complex web of historical, social, and normative frameworks, including traditions, laws, and various forms of social power. With the onset of Big Events, this web tightens, increasing both the exertion of power and individual dependency, making the atmosphere more constrictive than liberating.

The Age of Will highlights this dependency, enhancing it with increased surveillance. Individuals become targets of scrutiny and influence across various contexts and are affected by numerous factors, including economic status, health, residence, personal choices, and behavior. The rise of big data analysis and artificial intelligence intensifies this dynamic, enabling sophisticated profiling that informs assessments and decisions about individuals or groups (Barkane 2023: 34). Such technological advancements significantly encroach upon human autonomy, as our decision-making capacity is undermined (Barkane 2023: 35). The emergence of artificial intelligence in 2024, another Big Event, brings not only technological advancements but also an atmosphere charged with apprehension about technological domination and the potential for manipulation, abuse, and deception. Thus, this scenario places the ethical foundation of human autonomy at risk.

The concept of “autonomy” has evolved, particularly after the so-called “fall of the subject.” Considering critiques regarding the feasibility of complete autonomy, the concept has been reinterpreted as relational autonomy (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000), which is characterized by the quality of relationships. Silvia Pierosara shifts the focus from individual independence to the importance of human connections, suggesting that autonomy involves the capacity to maintain space for articulation and future planning (Pierosara 2021: 102). However, if we acknowledge the Big Events and the atmosphere that accompanies them, what does independent planning for the future entail? This leads to a naivety of reason.

The idea of “relational autonomy” raises questions, as it potentially reduces the person to merely a vessel for projects, diverging from the existential commitment depicted by Sartre as a leap towards the future. In an environment saturated with anxiety

and peril, traditional concepts of human autonomy—viewed as self-sufficiency or a self-contained reflective monad—are rendered obsolete, a relic of ephemeral utopias.

If the phenomenological perspective maintains its focus on the subject, then reducing a person to merely a function of their relationships risks rendering them akin to a pendulum, constantly swinging. Amidst the tumult of Big Events, individuals need an internal “stone”—a source of inner stability, a core, a consistent line, and a foundation. This solidity does not emerge from an endless web of relationships or the mere allocation of space for projects; it originates from a deep, fundamental essence within the person. Only truly free will can be deemed rational.

However, in an environment charged with populist rhetoric and overshadowed by Big Events, will becomes adrift, succumbing to the prevailing winds of popular sentiment. In this context, the concept of human autonomy, if predicated on the notion of the individual as a self-sufficient monad, becomes an elusive ideal. The era heralded by Sartre, envisioning a completely free and autonomous existence, has passed, challenging contemporary interpretations of autonomy within an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Küle 2022a). The existential freedom epitomized by Sartre's vision of an utterly autonomous being is now considered a bygone anarchistic ideal. Humans are inextricably influenced by Big Events, historicity, language, narratives, surveillance, biopower, and more.

The distinction between acting autonomously and acting responsibly, particularly in the context of being part of a larger community, implies that true autonomy—as conceived by Aristotle or Kant—adheres to standards beyond mere self-interest. It seeks a goal that transcends merely aligning with one's own desires or achieving consistency among them.

The relationship between the individual and society has shifted towards atomization on one side and towards the dominance of a strong Will (Power) on the other. Achieving a deliberate practice of autonomy and decision-making becomes challenging among atomized individuals.

The path to human autonomy does not traverse through individualism but rather through connectivity and openness to others. Autonomy is not found in isolation or in a will that operates alone; it resides in embracing Otherness. When individuals perceive themselves as autonomous, they often, unknowingly, incorporate diverse external influences and demands into their identity. Therefore, it is not just the will that is pivotal but also the environment—*Umwelt*, the surrounding atmosphere that nurtures rather than stifles. The likelihood of breaking free diminishes with the magnitude of the Event, as fear and anxiety escalate in today's world—fear of new viruses, war, terrorism, violence, and a growing eco-anxiety about humanity's place in the Universe.

Life experience extends beyond the binaries of fighting for freedom or succumbing to conformity, not strictly autonomous or heteronomous, but rather defined by a lack of curiosity while nourished by hope.

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