

A Nourishing Network

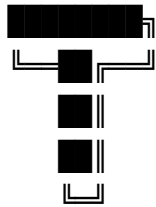
The Philosophy of Warnings

by Santiago Zabala

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his month an undergraduate student told me his parents were using the pandemic to persuade him to avoid philosophy as it could not prevent or solve real emergencies. I told him to let them know that we find ourselves in this global emergency because we haven't thought philosophically *enough*. The increasingly narrow focus of experts this century, has prevented us from addressing problems from a global perspective, which has always been the distinctive approach of philosophy. This is evident in the little consideration we give to warnings. Too often these are discarded as useless or insignificant—much like philosophy—when in fact they are vital. Though philosophers can't solve an ongoing emergency—philosophy was never meant to solve anything—we can interpret their signs through a “philosophy of warnings.” Although this philosophy probably won't change the views of my student's parents, it might help us to reevaluate our political, environmental, and technological priorities for the future.

Much like the recent philosophies of plants or insects¹, which emerged as a response to a global environmental crisis, a “philosophy of warnings” is also a reaction to a global emergency that requires philosophical elucidation. Although the ongoing pandemic has triggered this new stance it isn't limited to this event. Nor is it completely new. Warnings have been a topic of philosophical investigation for centuries. The difference lies in the meaning these concepts have acquired now. Before philosophy we had prophets to tell us to be alert to the warnings of the Gods, but we secularized that office into that of the philosopher, who, as one among equals, advised to heed the signs; to use our imagination, because that is all we have. The current pandemic has shown us how badly prepared we were for a global emergency, even one whose coming has been announced² for decades. But why haven't we been able to take these warnings seriously? Before tackling this question, let's recall how warnings have been addressed philosophically.

Examples of warning philosophy can be traced back to Greek mythology and Plato's *Apology*. Apollo provided Cassandra with the gift of prophecy even though she could not convince others of the validity of her predictions, and Socrates warned the

Athenians—after he was sentenced to death—that their inequity and mendacity undermined the democracy they claimed to honor. Against Gaston Bachelard, who coined the term “Cassandra complex” to refer to the idea that events could be known in advance, Theodore Adorno warned that any claim to know the future should be avoided. It is probably in this spirit that Walter Benjamin warned we should pull the brake on the train of progress as it was stacking disaster upon disaster. In line with Hannah Arendt’s warnings of the reemergence of totalitarianism after the Second World War, Giorgio Agamben began his book on the current pandemic with “A Warning”: biosecurity will now serve governments to rule through a new form of tyranny called “technological-sanitary” despotism.

These examples illustrate the difference between warnings and predictions. Warnings are sustained by signs in the present that request our involvement, as Benjamin suggests. Predictions call out what will take place regardless of our actions, a future as the only continuation of the present, but warnings instead point toward what is to come and are meant involve us in a radical break, a discontinuity with the present signaled by alarming signs that we are asked to confront. The problem is not the involvement warnings request from us, but rather whether we are willing to confront them at all. The volume of vital warnings that we ignore—climate change, social inequality, refugee crises—is alarming; it has become our greatest emergency.

Indifference towards warnings is rooted in the ongoing global return to order and realism in the twenty-first century. This return is not only political, as demonstrated by the various right-wing populist forces that have taken office around the world, but also cultural as the return of some contemporary intellectuals³ to Eurocentric Cartesian realism demonstrates. The idea that we can still claim access to truth without being dependent upon interpretation presupposes that knowledge of objective facts is enough to guide our lives. Within this theoretical framework warnings are cast off as unfounded, contingent, and subjective, even though philosophers of science such as Bruno Latour continue to remind⁴ us that no “attested knowledge can stand on its own.” The internet and, in particular, social media have intensified this realist view, further discrediting traditional vectors of legitimation (international agencies, major newspapers, or credentialed academics) and rendering any tweet by an anonymous blogger credible because it presents itself as transparent, direct, and genuine. “The quickness of social media, as Judith Butler

pointed out⁵, allows for forms of vitriol that do not exactly support thoughtful debate.”

Our inability to take warnings seriously has devastating consequences, as recent months make clear. The central argument in favor of a philosophy of warnings is not whether what it warns of comes to pass but rather the pressure it exercises against those emergencies hidden and subsumed under the global call to order. This pressure demands that our political, environmental, and technological priorities be reconsidered, revealing the alarming signs of democratic backsliding, loss of biodiversity, and commodification of our lives by surveillance capitalism. These warnings are also why we should oppose any demand to “return to normality,” which signals primarily a desire to ignore what caused this pandemic in the first place. A philosophy of warnings seeks to alter and interrupt the reality we’ve become accustomed to.

Although a philosophy of warnings will not prevent future emergencies, it will resist the ongoing silencing of emergencies under the guise of realism by challenging our framed global order and its realist advocates. This philosophy is not meant to rescue us *from* emergencies but rather rescue us *into* emergencies that we are trained to ignore.

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1. <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/a-philosophy-of-the-insect/9780231175791>
 2. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/experts-warned-pandemic-decades-ago-why-not-ready-for-coronavirus/>
 3. <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/returning-order-through-realism>
 4. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Down+to+Earth%3A+Politics+in+the+New+Climatic+Regime-p-9781509530564>
 5. <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times>

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