



Saramago's *Blindness* and Community

DUNCAN MCCOLL CHESNEY
National Taiwan University

Abstract

Drawing on classic works of philosophical anthropology by Helmuth Plessner, Max Scheler, and Arnold Gehlen, the article looks back at José Saramago's *Blindness*, (and its film version of 2008 by Fernando Meirelles), to explore his experiment in thinking the foundation of human community by imagining the response to a sort of pandemic of white blindness. Positing a fundamental precarity of human co-existence, Saramago subtly develops a set of basic moral values, including trust, dignity, and a *sensus communis*, to show what binds us together as meaningful communities in the absence of a shared ethico-religious tradition. Paying close attention to the details of Saramago's famous and gripping thought experiment, the article shows how the novel, with help from the resources of the tradition of philosophical anthropology in thinking human being as naturally "deficient" and "eccentric" and human nature as consequently basically communal, can continue to teach us important lessons in community today in a time of pandemic.

Keywords: Saramago, community, Plessner, Gehlen

© Duncan McColl Chesney

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

<http://interface.org.tw/> and <http://interface.ntu.edu.tw/>

Saramago's *Blindness* and Community

“One of the most shocking sights is when virtues, after the collapse of institutions in which they developed themselves in characteristic narrowness, fall back on the individual and are manifested as confusion and helplessness.”

(Arnold Gehlen, 1988, p. 71)

The celebrated novel *Blindness* by Nobel Prize winner José Saramago has proven increasingly relevant recently.¹ That novel depicts the unexplained occurrence of a white blindness epidemic (o mal-branco [Saramago, 2014, p. 47]) in an unspecified country that leads to the breakdown of all the institutions and norms of society. Amidst the subsequent war of all against all, one group manages to survive that forms around the one woman who, inexplicably, does not go blind. As the saying goes (more or less): in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed woman is queen, but our protagonist, or rather he (the eye doctor) and his still-seeing wife use this advantage not to lord over the afflicted, but rather to try to fight against the injustice and inhumanity that attends the breakdown of social norms. In fact the novel *Blindness*, published in English translation by Giovanni Pontiero in 1997, was originally titled, in Portuguese, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995) (*Essay on Blindness*) and the work is precisely *um ensaio*, an essay, not in the humanities sense of the word we associate with Michel de Montaigne, but in a scientific sense of the testing out of a hypothesis. Saramago uses the hypothesis of a blindness pandemic in order to think – via the breakdown of the social order – about the fundamental nature of man (and woman) – or rather, men and women because it turns out that this imaginative experiment in philosophical anthropology reveals definitively that man is by nature collective and communal and that there is essentially no such thing as

1 This paper originates from a talk at INTERFACEing 2021 “Pandemics & Plagues, Languages & Literatures” Oct 1-3, 2021 at National Taiwan University and reflects that original context. The research was undertaken with support from the Taiwan Ministry of Science and Technology #108-2410-H-002-021-.

the human in the singular.

In this paper I want to explore what Saramago in *Blindness* has to teach us, in a time of pandemic, about community and value. To do this I want to include, in my analysis of the novel by Saramago, the film version by Fernando Meirelles of 2008, as perhaps being more popular and more widely known than the novel itself (however, I do not want to get side-tracked into the ever-problematic question of film adaptation, and will more or less take for granted the transposition of the novel to the screen). More importantly, I want to follow Saramago in his essay of philosophical anthropology by looking to some key texts in precisely that discipline from the early- to mid-20th Century (notably Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen) to see what these texts also still have to teach us about human nature and human value.

1 *Blindness* and values

The film, like the novel before it, is divided into three parts: the onset of the contagion and nascent social breakdown with political attempts at containment (or immunization), leading to the second part: the quarantine of the infected in an abandoned asylum; and finally the escape from the asylum into a general, apocalyptic “state of nature” scenario in which our group manages to survive until the pandemic passes and normal life, we presume, is to be re-established (this optimistic ending is accentuated in the film version, as day breaks and the first blind man regains his vision leading to a collective euphoria).² The first section is of interest here only for introducing the core group who will be important in the rest of the novel: the first blind man and his wife (who in the film are of Japanese origin), the doctor and his wife, the girl with sunglasses (a sometime prostitute), the little boy with the squint, the man with the eye patch (who in the film is black – thus the film makes a concerted effort to stress the diversity and heterogeneity of the group). None of the characters is named, just as the city and country in which the story takes place are withheld – obviously serving the purpose of an

² On the overly optimistic ending of the film version, and other changes in the adaptation, see Donohue (2017), especially pp. 81-82. This optimism is of course belied by that companion novel, *Ensaio sobre a lucidez*.

INTERFACE

abstract generalization: Saramago's essay.³

Much of the pathos of the film is developed in the second section where, in a concentration-camp environment, the group is forced to develop basic ways of living together and coping with their new handicap. Residual values are on display, for instance shame and dignity: at one point the doctor speaks of “empathy and human decency” —these form the basis of the behavior of the group in the first ward centered around the doctor's wife. A fragile order is developed at first while the group is still being attended to (however harshly) by the authorities, but eventually the authorities more or less leave the blind to themselves, with minimal upkeep, and things get much worse as a violent order overtakes the asylum. Some of the new arrivals (newly afflicted blind aided by a “normally” blind man who is much more used to the affliction) have decided to take over the institutional distribution of food and begin running an extortion racket. In the absence of any police or military presence within the camp, their violence and might determines the law of the space (might makes right). At first they demand money and valuables, then later, in a ghastly scene, sexual access to the women. The degradation and rape of all of the women from the first ward of the hospital leads, on a second occasion, to retaliation, as the doctor's wife, who has kept behind a pair of scissors from her initial personal belongings (or the prostitute's in the film), takes justice into her own hands and kills the leader of the extortion gang. What follows is a miniature war or siege as the exploited members of the first ward rise in a collective revolt. The ensuing fire and destruction would probably lead to the death of everyone, but at the last dramatic moment the doors are forced open and the blind realize that their hospital-prison-camp has been abandoned by their military guard, and they are in fact free (which as Saramago points out, also means they are abandoned [Saramago, 2014, p.217; 1997, p. 233]). The values on display in this section, besides **dignity** and **shame**, include a sense of **fairness** or **justice**, **pity** or **care**, and **solidarity** (in struggle against counter-forces of selfishness, fear, and violence).

3 A reader of the manuscript sees these generalizations as in fact stereotypes: the good doctor, the mama's boy, the hooker with the heart of gold, and so forth, suggesting on the one hand that Saramago is engaged in an (ironic) parable rather than any sort of realism, but also, I maintain, stressing that out of plurality some kind of unity can be formed in need.

The third part then treats of blindness in society at large: the complete breakdown of the social order and the fight of all for survival. The group makes their way through the chaotic city, like everyone else in search of food. The focal point of the group is, for obvious reasons, the doctor's wife, the one person inexplicably not stricken by the white blindness. Saramago makes a great deal out of her onus as seer and leader, speaking of her heavy responsibility (Saramago, 2014, p. 252; 1997, p. 267) which can also be seen as a curse, since she is the only one who has to witness the horror (Saramago, 2014, p. 276; 1997, p. 291). The group settles in the unoccupied apartment of the doctor and his wife, but – in the book – sets out periodically to the apartments of the others in search of family, food, and information.

In the midst of the failed state and the “natural” chaos of the city, it really is every man or group for him-/itself, and our band obviously manages to survive thanks not only to the eyes of the doctor's wife, but the *esprit de corps* they manage to develop. This is made more explicit in the novel than in the film (which has to cut material to meet a reasonable screen time): for instance, Saramago shows nascent populist stirrings in speechifying in the public square: in the one case, quasi-religious talk of apocalypse (Saramago, 2014, p. 298; 1997, p. 314), in another somewhat comical speculation about organization and politics (Saramago, 2014, p. 311; 1997, p. 327-8), as a way of showing dangerous potential forms of community (or mass stirrings) clearly in contrast to our privileged *bande à part*. At one point —also only in the novel— the group meets a woman at the building where the girl with dark glasses used to live. She manages to survive in a wild, individual primitivism – another marked contrast to our group – and when they come back to visit her a second time, she has succumbed to violent necessity and death, alone. (Cumulatively, the film is thus in some respects weaker in its presentation of the community theme.)⁴ This raises the issue of **burial** and human decency (Saramago, 2014, p. 300; 1997, p. 316), which already arose in the asylum when the doctor had to lead groups in the burial of the dead, and with the women after the gang rape in the poignant

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the novel itself, in a different theoretical frame, see Chesney, 2020.

INTERFACE

washing and burying of the body of the woman who suffered from insomnia (Saramago, 2014, pp. 183-5; 1997, pp. 198-9). With little details about maintaining human decency, Saramago subtly, over the course of the story, develops a set of fundamental, ethical values for his group: **generosity** and **altruism**, **dignity** and **self-respect**, **trust** and **responsibility**, **respect** for others and for the dead, **modesty**, and so forth, and on the basis of these values —to risk using a concept from Ferdinand Tönnies [1926, p.21; 2001, p. 7]— the development of a certain *concord* (*Eintracht*). *Blindness*, indeed, is precisely an exploration of what basic values could form the basis of community in the absence of traditions and normal institutional support. The novel and film ask, what does it mean to form a community in the face of basic human precarity?

Saramago stages a crisis situation – a pandemic – in order to reveal latent weaknesses undergirding social relations in this non-specified modern urban society, this *anyplace* of the modern world: the violent and callous institutional state response; the recourse to a Hobbesian state of war among some of the people who act with selfishness, violence, and a contempt for the collective values; but he does this to emphasize the ethical resilience of the band that finds in community strength to survive the extreme situation of the white blindness. The intention is to encourage the discovery and cultivation of such communities ourselves in “the real world,” our contemporary precarious societies, both in times of specific crisis – of which there are more and many (notably COVID19) – as in times of relative calm and peace. How can Saramago’s novel continue to teach us something about community? What is community?

2 Mängelwesen

Philosophical Anthropology has existed at least since Rousseau, Herder and Kant but was especially developed, after (and against) Nietzsche, primarily in Germany from the 1920s to the 40s, at the same time Heidegger was steering Husserlian phenomenology towards fundamen-

tal ontology, and even as Freud was extending his analytical model towards larger questions of culture and civilization. My contention is that this tradition can help us understand Saramago's essay on community by clarifying the fundamental qualities of human being. Biologically speaking, according to Arnold Gehlen (1988, p.13), humans are "deficient beings" (*Mängelwesen*): with respect to other animals (and plants) adapted to their particular environments, humans are characterized by "lack of adaptation, lack of specialization, primitivism, and immaturity" (Gehlen, 1988, p. 26, trans. modified). The emblem of this deficiency is the hopeless vulnerability of the human infant: sheer exposure, neediness and dependence [see Plessner, 2019, p. 289].

In coming to selfhood the infant passes through the care and interaction of the family (the primary habitus) and comes to self concomitantly with coming to language. So any eventual individual is who he or she is by virtue of this mediation of the other, of language and community; and incipiently formed in terms of gender, class, race, and so forth according to that initial community. There is, of course, nothing necessary or essential about which coordinates determine the community of a given child: irrespective of historical contingency, what IS essential about any given child is that it is exposed, precarious by nature, and requires community to *be* at all.⁵ (This is an important aspect of the speculation of e.g. Plessner: the current ideas about community in National Socialist Germany, drawing on Tönnies' famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and of course drawing as well on dodgy racial theories, were precisely NOT what the philosophical anthropologists were finding in their analysis of human nature and community. They speak of "natural" community – insofar as it is essentially human – as a negative aspect of human precarity rather than a positive fact of the family or primal horde leading to an essential tribal, communal life.)

5 Obviously there is something like "natural" community in family, kinship, and blood, but not for any essential reasons: just the exposure of human being... (certainly for some natural reasons: maternal and paternal instincts, for example). But Plessner is keen to distance his conception from that of e.g. Ferdinand Tönnies. Against Tönnies and natural organic community or *Gemeinschaft*, Plessner asserts that we have a natural fear of the other but also an uncanny connection to the other: this leads to recognition of difference (of the other, but also in the self) and thus to a certain relativism, but also to cultural tolerance. (But still, it must be said, there are limits to community, explored in *The Limits of Community* of 1924).

INTERFACE

Now, according to Helmuth Plessner, the human –in contrast to animals and plants– is characterized by “eccentric positionality”: being centered in a world without being its center (without, like the animal, being captivated by and in that world). For this reason, the human is not closed within a world but is *Weltoffen* (in Scheler’s terms): world open (This has obvious resonance with contemporary speculations of Heidegger).⁶ There is thus a gap of mediation between human and world – which is filled in by language and (rational) reflection (Gehlen) in anticipatory action (and thus a time dimension, a future): Hence the “natural artificiality” of the human (Plessner 2019, p. 287). The human is also characterized by Plessner as *both* being a body *and* having a body (in the Körper-Leib distinction): and this leads, as Scheler argues, to a specific human “detachment” with respect to bodily being –any given human is *both* his or her physical, affective, vulnerable body, *and* something else over and above that body which consciously reflects thereupon– thus *both* an individual, animal, physical being *and* a communal-cultural, reflective being.

Along with the human poverty of instinct, Gehlen notes the existence of numerous drives but also the dimension of delay or “hiatus” (Gehlen p. 47) in human gratification or satisfaction of impulse and drive (which Freud was exploring at that same time); thus: repression and sublimation – effectively the motors of human reflection and culture. Humans are remarkable for their “Natural artificiality” —(instinctual and physical) lack and (cultural) supplement. Culture then, as Gehlen has it (p. 30), is *second* nature; this is the space of *Geist*, but it is a necessarily collective space. As Plessner (2019, p. 282) writes:

We...is strictly speaking the only thing that can be called ‘spirit.’ Understood in the purest sense, spirit is different from the psyche and from consciousness. The psyche is real as the internal existence of the person. Consciousness is the way in which the world presents itself as determined by the eccentricity of personal existence. Spirit on the other hand is the sphere created and

6 As in the famous discussion “What is World” in Part Two of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*.

existing along with this particular form of positionality and thus does not constitute a reality but is realized in the shared world even if only one person exists.

Spirit is collective (like language). So, while Heidegger, in 1927 (in section 41 of *Sein & Zeit* on *Sorge* or Care), writes of *Mitsein* or *Mitdasein* (specifically with respect to *Sorge* and *Fürsorge* or solicitude),⁷ he did not develop this concept extensively, but Plessner a year later speaks of *Mitwelt*, not so much a shared world as *the world as the shared*, the communal. There simply is no *Dasein* that is not *Mitdasein* for Plessner, and no *Welt* that is not *Mitwelt*. “The shared world is the form of the human’s own position, conceived by him as the sphere of other humans. We can thus say that the eccentric form of positionality generates the shared world and guarantees its reality” (Plessner, 2019, p. 280) Or rather, “The shared world, where relations-with not only exist but where the relation-with has become the constitutive form of a real world where the emphatic I and you merge into the we” (Plessner, 2019, p. 286).

The stress here, in contrast to the more individualist-existential thinking of Heidegger, is communal inter-relation as “naturally-artificially” marking human being or essence. By starting from human biological precarity, one realizes the essentially communal nature of human being.

3 Sensus communis

So, humans are essentially communal. What is the nature of the interrelation between them? Getting back to Saramago – what is the nature of the interrelation of the members of the *Verbindung* (as in Tönnies, 1926, p. 17; 2001, p. 4) or group in *Blindness*, and can this teach us anything in the light of philosophical anthropology? Saramago goes to some ef-

7 “The Being of Dasein means ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world). This Being fills in the signification of the term ‘care’...” specified in the following paragraph as: “Being with the Dasein-with of Others as we encounter it within-the-world could be taken as solicitude” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 237); “Das Sein des Daseins besagt: Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in-(der-Welt) als Sein-bei (innerweltlich begegnendem Seienden). Dieses Sein erfüllt die Bedeutung des Titels Sorge...” and in the next paragraph: “das Sein mit dem innerweltlich begegnenden Mitdasein Anderer als Fürsorge gefaßt werden” (Heidegger, 1984, pp. 192-3).

INTERFACE

fort to try to detail what community might involve. Developing trust through thoughtfulness and considerateness (and *authority*, it should be noted —the figure of the doctor) and upon that building a sort of moral *concord* involving **self-respect, patience, courage, honesty, fairness, conscientiousness, discretion, and perceptiveness...** to borrow a list from Annette Baier⁸ who in Humean fashion reflects on a certain inherited moral tradition of Western societies. We might hazard here a further grounding virtue or indeed characteristic of man on display in the novel and film, a *sensus communis* or common sense, not in the normal understanding of that term as “sound practical judgment concerning everyday matters,” much less as it functions in Kant’s notion of aesthetic taste to unify otherwise merely subjective judgments (e.g. Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments §40, [Kant, 1987, pp.293-6]), but as the Earl of Shaftesbury understands the notion, drawing on the classical tradition (citing Horace, Seneca, Cicero, and various commentators on the Greeks) of *κοινωνημοσύνη*, a

“sense of public weal and of the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or that sort of civility which rises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind, of the natural equality there is among those of the same species”

(Shaftesbury, 1999, p. 48)

This idea of *koinonoēmosynē*, a common or shared sense precisely of the common, of the shared, is a neglected human characteristic (or virtue) in the moral philosophical tradition, but I think Saramago has an intuitive understanding that it is something we essentially share. (Shaftesbury, for his part – with very different social and class coordinates – could argue that “to have no sense or feeling of this kind, no love of ... community or anything in common, would be the same as to be insensible even of the plainest means of self-preservation and most necessary condition of self-enjoyment” [Shaftesbury, 1999, pp. 51-2]). Again it is around the doctor’s wife that Saramago develops this virtue :she takes it for granted that she is responsible for the whole group, but

8 “Demoralization, Trust, and the Virtues” in Baier (2009, pp. 173-188).

eventually the other members show mutual concern for each other, thus suggesting a sense of the common even deeper than any kind of selfish (or possessive) individualism. It is the precarity, the undifferentiation, the dispossession that leads the individual members of the group to neglect their individuality, so to speak, in a collective spirit that Saramago posits here as more basic, more human: an undistorted *Mitsein* and *esprit de corps*.

Now, moral intuitionism of the sort Shaftesbury or Hume engage in suffers from some of the weaknesses of (Aristotelian) virtue ethics, presupposing a certain, thick tradition that is culturally specific. But the question is not what is *our* tradition, given the premise that *we* don't any longer have *one* (thus the diverse group in the film), but what could be a reasonable set of values going forward for a heterogeneous group of people that could thereby become a meaningful community. The doctor and his wife, through their own relationship, set the tone for the group. **Cooperative practice** (Baier, 1994, p. 242) and subsequent **trust** among the members of the group is the basis for the moral strength of the individuals in a mutually sustaining **concord**. In the terms Baier (1994, p. 133) uses: "trust is accepted vulnerability to another's power to harm one, a power inseparable from the power to look after some aspect of one's good". This gift of exposure or vulnerability is in Baier's understanding the foundation of moral community in trust. This isn't just an ontological fact, but ethical *acts* in Saramago's fleshing out of a conception of community.

The virtues or values we see developed in Saramago: Care, generosity, respect, modesty, cooperation, trust, concord, and dignity (that latter so important for Plessner in his conception of society). These are offered as (some) basic values that could anchor a notion of community not based in any sort of *Blut und Boden* essentialism or populist nationalism. Plessner, for one, was concerned with moving beyond immediate community to the public sphere, to institutions that minimize the work involved in peaceable cohabitation and *Mitsein*, politically conceived (as was Gehlen in his emphasis on the habituating, that is conservative, nature of institutions). Saramago reveals more of a pessimism about the

INTERFACE

shift from basic community to the larger political unit of the state in *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* [*Seeing*], the companion volume to *Blindness* (as well as in various other works). The topic of Saramago and politics falls outside of the current discussion, but certainly merits further exploration. Still, in his fictional speculation about what a pandemic and social crisis can reveal about “human nature” —that is, in his novelistic-philosophical anthropology— Saramago has given us much to think about as we face our own real-life crises now and in the near future, and as we think about who “we” are or could be.

References

- Baier, Annette C. (1994). *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- . (2009). *Reflections On How We Live*. Oxford: OUP, 2009.
- Chesney, Duncan McColl. (2020). "Re-reading Saramago on Community – *Blindness*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (6 Jul 2020) doi:10.1080/00111619.2020.1790488
- Donohue, Micah K. (2017). "Adaptation, Abjection, and Homecoming in Saramago's *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira* and Meirelles's *Blindness*." *Hispanofila*, no. 179, pp. 77-95. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1353/hsf.2017.0010.
- Gehlen, Arnold. (1988). *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*. Trans. Clare McMillan. New York: Columbia UP.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962). *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- . (1984). *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- . (1995). *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Kant, Immanuel. (1987). *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Meirelles, Fernando, dir. (2008) *Blindness*. Miramax Films.
- Plessner, Helmuth. (2019). *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*. 1928. Trans. Millay Hyatt. New York: Fordham UP.
- . (1999). *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*. Trans. Andrew Wallace. Atlantic Highlands (NJ): Humanities Press.
- . (2018). *Political Anthropology*. Trans. Nils F. Schott. Evanston: Northwestern UP.
- Saramago, José. (1997). *Blindness*. Trans. Giovanni Pontiero. Orlando: Harcourt.
- . (2014). *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*. 1995. Lisboa: Porto Editora.
- Scheler, Max. (2019). *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. 1928. Trans. Manfred S. Frings. Northwestern UP, 2009. New York: Ford-

INTERFACE

ham UP.

Shaftesbury [Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury].

(1999). *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. [1711].

Ed. Lawrence Klein. Cambridge: CUP.

Tönnies, Ferdinand. (2001). *Community and Civil Society*. 1887. Ed.

Jose Harris. Trans. Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis. Cam-

bridge: CUP.

---. (1926). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffe der reinen*

Soziologie. 1887. Berlin: Karl Curtius.

[received on April 25, 2022

accepted on July 17, 2022]