

# FORMA DE VIDA - REVIEWS

Natalia Carrillo & Pau Luque, *Hipocondría Moral*<sup>†</sup>

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Pedro Franco\*

In 2003, at the height of the “war on terror,” Susan Sontag wrote that the apparent insensitivity that results from excessive exposure to images of misery and violence hides, after all, a considerable amount of anger and frustration, which we are unable to vent.<sup>1</sup> We could say that it is from this hidden layer that moral hypochondria emerges in the antipodes of torpor and anaesthesia. This is a characteristic phenomenon of our time, and it is not unrelated to the consolidation of the bourgeoisie or, in perhaps less ideological terms, of the middle classes. Therefore, the psychoanalytic tenor of this idea is not strange (the popularity of psychoanalysis is also a bourgeois or middle-class phenomenon). It is, thus, in this social spectrum that the disquisition of the philosophers Natalia Carrillo (philosopher of science at the University of Vienna) and Pau Luque (philosopher of law at the National Autonomous University of Mexico) is situated, in their essay just published by Anagrama.

The concept of moral hypochondria is not new, as the authors of this short yet forceful essay explain. Carrillo and Luque clarify that the concept goes back to Erich Fromm's Freudian-inspired theories. It is Fromm, moreover, who coined the term itself in his book *The Heart of Man* (pp. 19–25). Fromm (and Carrillo and Luque) clarify that moral hypochondria consists of interpreting feelings of guilt or blamefulness as actual blame, just as the literal hypochondriac diagnoses an illness in himself from a set of sensations or visible signs in his body. Evidently, Carrillo and Luque concede that emotion over misery and a certain degree of responsibility for those who suffer is associated with a minimum level of decency. However, the transition from mere feeling to belief in absolute responsibility characterizes moral hypochondria, and this reveals, according to the authors, an aggravated form of narcissism. Indeed, for the moral hypochondriac, what matters is not the people for whose misery he feels guilty but the guilty person herself. Like the classic narcissist, the hypochondriac is, after all, the center of the world. There is no distinction between his inner life and reality (p. 23), and this illusion, as one can imagine, is the source of countless problems. These problems often carry consequences contradictory to the moral agent's good intentions or supposedly altruistic concerns.

This description might suggest to us, almost immediately and by way of illustration, the white savior complex, who feels that she must be, in a very inadequate way, the protagonist in repairing historical or current injustices inflicted on non-whites. Yet, we are disillusioned when we realize the greater difficulty that this issue implies. Carrillo and Luque invoke two fundamental examples that help us to understand how moral hypochondria can evolve to the point where the hypochondriac seeks self-annulment, which is apparently contrary to the narcissism characteristic of this phenomenon. The first example they refer to is that of Kathy Boudin (1943-2022). Boudin, the daughter of left-wing lawyers from New York, was an activist against the Vietnam war and, later, a member of the radical May 19 movement.<sup>2</sup> Her will of prominence was disclosed after the invasion of the famous convention of the Democrats in Chicago in 1968. Having the opportunity to evade the police, she surrendered because, as she herself acknowledged, she "wanted to be a heroine" (p. 29). The change occurs later, the result of a strange moral development: her desire will transform itself into the renunciation of her autonomy. In 1981, with the May 19 movement, Boudin collaborated in the robbery of an armored car carried out by the Black Liberation Army, which resulted in three casualties (one security guard and two police officers). Her form of participation was limited to executing orders. She did so because she felt that she was "not entitled" to any opinion under her privileged status and that it was only her duty to unconditionally support the agents of the revolution (p. 14).

The second example they refer to is fictional, although inspired by Boudin. This example also points to the transition from autonomy to submission, from activity to almost passivity. Merry Levov, the character of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), shows us a similar evolution in a very clear narration: an evolution that begins with the first moment of perceiving injustice (precisely through a news report on the television), the feeling that no one takes responsibility, and the absolute assumption of that same responsibility, to the point of terrorism. Levov is also the daughter of upper-middle-class Americans. They found themselves in the midst of the tumultuous years of the Vietnam War and civil rights struggles, which contributed to her internalization of guilt. But what Levov's case adds to the discussion is that it shows a form of hypochondria that goes beyond the social aspect and that, as Carrillo and Luque say, becomes natural: at a certain point, for Levov it is no longer the social condition which is a reason for guilt, but her biological existence, which will ultimately lead her to convert to a cult that seeks to nullify the effects of human beings' passage on Earth (p. 51).

It is true that, as Carrillo and Luque say, the alleged abdication of agency on the part of these women only reveals their privilege, which is deeply embarrassing (p. 16), but what is more relevant is that this same gesture translates the culmination of hypochondria: the annulment of one's own existence, through a form of humiliation or emptying (or *kenosis*, as the New Testament expression well captures). A hypochondriac (we are all acquainted with one, if not ourselves) hastens to study her illness, to adopt unusual hygiene and food habits, in more serious cases to self-medicate and, at the limit, not to leave the house, with fear of contracting some disease. Likewise, a moral hypochondriac rushes to put out fires, save lives, and may reach a point where, like Levov, she feels she can no longer breathe without harming microorganisms.

However, the transition from autonomy to submission, driven by hypochondria, does not hinder narcissism because, as the authors say, it is not the moral agents that act in the political struggle; it is the political struggle that acts in them to try to dissolve the pathological guilt that does not abandon them (p. 31). It seems that, at this pivotal point, one could explore more deeply the idea of conversion, something that perhaps could have been done, rather than a long, otherwise interesting but apparently digressive discussion of Roth's authorial processes and identity issues (the link between moral hypochondria and Roth's Jewish "self-hatred" or his tendency to represent women deprecatorily, for example, remains unclear).

The matter of conversion would explain, for example, why it is so important that moral hypochondriacs have a *conviction*, and not a mere fantasy, like Luis Buñuel's Archibaldo or the monster that Kanye West claims to be (examples that the authors collect to illustrate the fanciful aspect of moral hypochondria, pp. 98-101); why hypochondriacs do not feel guilty about the acts of protest, even when lethal, while the guilt that caused them remains, and, more fundamentally, how it is possible that a sudden moment of conversion (e.g., the visualization of a news report) provides such permanent and radical changes in life, something William James had demonstrated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). According to James, there is a mental substratum in converts, which makes conversion somehow intelligible (something that brings us closer to Sontag's abovementioned idea), and this often translates into the acquired notion of being a "sick soul." It is characteristic of this sick soul that she feels that she must extirpate from the world and herself the evil that she begins to identify, which hardly disappears. The task, of course, is never completed, and this becomes complicated, especially in Protestant contexts, where there is no absolution from sin and righteousness turns into a sign of salvation. But this fixation on evil is not, however, an exclusively Protestant mark: James went so far as to say that saintliness, in some historical cases, was confused with fanaticism and the obsession with purity, which is aggravated by the primacy of obedience in the Catholic case (if we notice similarities with the present case studies, it is no coincidence).<sup>3</sup>

Precisely, it is also in this aspect that the political face of the problem of moral hypochondria lies. These examples are followed by an interesting reflection on the current state of the political left, which, due to moral hypochondria, has become a "vampire castle," as Mark Fisher calls it (pp. 76-89). Unlike the extreme cases of Levov and Boudin, middle-class leftists quickly realize that they will not be able to eradicate their guilt (because they will not be able to repair all the injustices simultaneously) and therefore focus on making others feel guilty, preaching and accusing their inconsistencies. Acting, in short, as veritable "vampires." And this is the most common form of moral hypochondria, a well-known phenomenon in social media (but not exclusively in social media).

Carrillo and Luque's proposal to heal this affliction takes two paths: the "Joan Didion method," or the journalistic look, and an idea of Hannah Arendt, viz., the idea of "metaphorical guilt." These responses work both on a personal and political level, being that both Didion and Arendt, for very different reasons, cherish the separation between private and public, personal and political. What is more relevant is that they are outright opposers to sentimentality in both spheres. Therefore, the frequent distinction between empathy and sympathy would be appropriate here: respectively, feeling what I imagine the other to feel versus

feeling something (e.g., pity, indignation) for what I imagine the other feels while preserving my distance.<sup>4</sup> Carrillo and Luque seem to be more inclined toward sympathy than empathy in this sense.

Starting with the "Didion method," the authors of the essay contrast the distanced and journalistic look with sentimentality, which contains a danger for practical and political rationality: that of preventing adequate scrutiny of particular situations and social conflicts. In this sense, there is evident sentimentality in moral hypochondria insofar as it limits the perception and reflection of moral agents (Boudin and Levov prove that). However, the examples that Carrillo and Luque invoke for this specific argument seem to refer to cases of sentimentality *stricto sensu* and not to moral hypochondria as described at the beginning of the essay. Consider the child Didion found on acid in a Californian household in the 1960s, the woman who was assaulted and raped when jogging at night in Central Park in 1988, or the murder of Samuel Luiz, a young gay man from Coruña, in 2021. In neither could the onlookers or observers feel guilt or even responsibility for what happened, unlike Boudin and Levov, who found blame for war and injustice in their identity. The criticism that sentimentality obscures an adequate reaction to this type of calamity (parental neglect, assaults and rapes, and murders) is correct. However, what is at stake in these examples is not guilt but rather the marginal responsibility of moral agents for changing similar situations in the future and for the contexts that favor them, be it the moral anarchy of hippie families, insecurity in the city, or homophobia. And that responsibility is indeed called into question by the empty expressions of solidarity generated by sentimentality (often expressions that hide other prejudices, as Didion proved in the case of the rape in Central Park, p. 61).

More useful is the idea of metaphorical guilt, which allows us to respond to the perplexities generated by ideas such as "the white man's guilt" or even, if you like, the vacuity of blaming an entire generation for the Anthropocene (instead of certain economic agents, for example). Strictly speaking, this metaphorical guilt is, in fact, a metonymy, or synecdoche to be more precise. Often, the guilt of a moral agent is not simply representative or symbolic but is active and partial. Think of the ecological imbalances or the violation of human rights involved in a simple purchase, which is only the end of a dubious production chain. In the case of male and white privilege, causality is more difficult to identify, but the moral agent identifiable as a "white male," for example, is effectively implicated in a web of power relations that he can choose to try to break or not (pp. 104-105). In this sense, the buyer of the dubious product or the white man is not the metaphor but, in a way, the metonymy of these injustices. These considerations do not fit into the binomial that the authors mention of "active injustice" versus "passive injustice," as Judith Shklar put it. For these cases, we would need a category of "indirect active injustice" – something that the authors intuit without using this expression (p. 106-107).

Problems arise when the partial or metonymic character of guilt is not considered and, in its place, abstraction grows, obstructing effective and reasonable accountability. In such cases, either passivity or activity is exacerbated, leading to inaction or terrorism. This happens with what Carrillo and Luque call "hyper-reflection" or "overthinking." Interestingly, this hyper-reflection seems to have the same effects as the sentimentality mentioned above – it limits perception and

destroys elementary moral knowledge – which tells us something about the quality of much reflection on injustice, namely structural injustice. In this sense, the authors' description of the stages of moral hypochondria seems accurate: malaise and immediate guilt for the observed misery, an attempt to rationalize it, and, finally, a response to guilt in a relatively abstract reality, such as social privilege (pp. 93–94). But this description does not seem to correspond exactly to a case of hyper-reflection but to a case of interruption or deviation of reflection, as happens with sentimentalists.

The authors conclude that this is where the task of ethics is played: that of recovering responsibility for the concrete (p. 96), something in which moderate guilt can play a role, namely, that of an antidote against cynicism (p. 88). At this point, the influence of the philosopher Bernard Williams is declared (p. 91 ff.).<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of Williams' moral philosophy is, however, debatable – and this is relevant not only for exegesis but for the argument of the essay itself. First, contrary to what the authors conjecture in a footnote (p. 93), it is not clear that the work of Bernard Williams consisted of a defense that mere reflection destroys moral knowledge: it is fundamental to ethical trust. <sup>6</sup> But more than that, it is also not clear that Williams wanted to completely expunge the notion of guilt from the vocabulary of ethics, as argued by Carrillo and Luque (p. 112). Williams addressed the issue of the split between remorse and regret in his famous essay "Moral Luck" (1976). This distinction between mere "regret," typical of an observer or onlooker, and remorse or "agent-regret," as Williams calls it, could, moreover, have been pertinent both in distinguishing the examples of sentimentality that we have seen, in unraveling indirect active injustice, as well as in the argument of the utility of marginal guilt. As Williams says, we would all be surprised by the absence of guilt in a lorry driver who unintentionally runs over a child, and we all recognize the need to alleviate his guilt progressively. <sup>7</sup> In the same way, and as, unfortunately, it turns out, the privileged existence of a moral agent can be a violation of the dignified existence of so many other people, and 1) the guilt needs to be moderated because this violation is not strictly voluntary and 2) the (partially) agential basis of this abuse still requires damage prevention or reparation. And if the damage results from a collective body (even if diffuse), it is also from a collective that repair or prevention must necessarily arise. Thus, the narcissism pointed out at the beginning is rejected.

Carrillo and Luque's essay draws our attention to an intriguing, problematic, and extremely pervasive moral phenomenon. The authors intelligently identify and locate it in its social environment. At times, it could benefit from clearer distinctions and relations of ideas (e.g., empathy and sympathy, moral hypochondria, and sentimentality) and from reflections on neighboring and broader phenomena (conversion, regret, and remorse). Despite these minor and more or less unavoidable issues, this essay (or its rubble from which we can continue to build something) offers what we need and look for in a philosophical essay: an opportunity to reflect in depth on our own lives, individual and collective; in this case, about our moral idiosyncrasies, especially the less flattering ones.

## References

Carrillo, Natalia; Luque, Pau. *Hipocondría Moral*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2022

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004 [2003]), 91.

<sup>2</sup> A radical faction of the Weather Underground that joined the Black Liberation Army.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1902]). On the “sick soul” see *ibid.*, 108 ff. On saintliness as fanaticism and purity see *ibid.*, 265 ff. The fact that Kathy Boudin and Merry Levov are of Jewish origin does not negate the fact that this way of feeling was transmitted to them by the society in which they were brought up, nor the clear analogies with what happened in their lives. On the universality of the idea of conversion see *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Suzanne Keen. *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 4-5: “In empathy, sometimes described as an emotion in its own right, we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others. This phenomenon is distinguished in both psychology and philosophy (though not in popular usage) from sympathy, in which feelings for another occur.”

<sup>5</sup> This inspiration, in any case, had already been noted in the refutation of a morality of “obligations”, pp. 87-88. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1993 [1985]), 180.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171: “[Ethical] confidence is both a social state and related to discussion, theorizing, and reflection; correspondingly, these activities are themselves forms of practice, which take up social space, just as in the individual they take up psychological space.”

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1981]), 27-28.

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