THE ETHICS BEHIND HIKIKOMORI RESISTANCE

A ÉTICA DA RESISTÊNCIA HIKIKOMORI

Domingo Fernández Agis[1]

Abstract: The *hikikomori* are young people who lock themselves in their room for months or years, refusing to leave it despite the requests of their family and the requirements of their social environment. They stand firm against all these pressures. That is why we could describe his attitude as belonging to a resistant person. However, we would not know in advance if your resistance can merit the qualification of ethics. This is one of the aspects that I try to clarify in this essay.

On the other hand, based on current biopolitics, I analyze how the *hikikomori* poses with its own existence questions that are certainly disturbing, but it also opens the way to find answers to others that haunt us and we do not know how to approach them.

Keywords: *Hikikomori, katechon*, ethics, freedom, guilt, violence, biopolitics.

Resumo: Os hikikomori são jovens que se travam no quarto por meses ou anos, recusando-se a deixá-lo, apesar dos pedidos de sua família e dos requisitos de seu ambiente social. Eles permanecem firmes contra todas essas pressões. É por isso que podemos descrever sua atitude como pertencendo a uma pessoa resistente. No entanto, não saberíamos com antecedência se sua resistência pode merecer a qualificação da ética. Esse é um dos aspectos que tento esclarecer neste ensaio.

Por outro lado, com base na biopolítica atual, analiso como o hikikomori coloca com sua própria existência questões que certamente são perturbadoras, mas também abre o caminho para encontrar respostas para outras pessoas que nos assombram e não sabemos como abordá-las.

Palavras-chave: Hikikomori, katechon, ética, liberdade, culpa, violência, biopolítica.

Introduction

The *hikikomori* are young people who lock themselves in their room for months or years, refusing to leave it despite the requests of their family and the requirements of their social environment. They stand firm against all these pressures. That is why we could describe his attitude as belonging to a resistant person. However, we would not know in advance if your resistance can merit the qualification of ethics. The social judgement made of it makes us doubt so, as it is insisted on the fact that in this limited space where they want to stay in, whatever

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[1] Universidad de La Laguna, Facultadde Humanidades,Sección de Filosofía. dferagi@ull.edu.es

happens, and whatever the cost, they mainly spend their time surfing the internet and playing videogames. They do not seem, in consequence, worthy of a positive social and moral judgement. Instead, they are considered individuals afflicted by psychic problems that make them incapable of adapting to social requirements and compromises.

In effect, it might seem they are but misfits that only wish to live inside their own obsessions. However, when we think about their way to proceed, we realize that the most important thing for them is to be out of the social time and space. This seems to be the triumph they chase with their act of resistance. They want to create a world of their own, in which they can't introduce themselves in a way other than a difficult process of adaptation, that ends up transforming their biorhythms and perceptive habits. When that happens, their own body tells them they have succeeded in being away from the collective norm. We could say, to sum it up, that their desire is inhabiting their own time and space, apart from social normalization.

Resistance as existential imperative

Japan is the country where *hikikomori* are most abundant, but this tendency is growing in all developed countries. And so, *hikikomori* can be seen as resistant people to the tendencies and ways of existing that actual society imposes. That is why we can interpret their vital option as one of the people who practice passive resistance, in front of the requirements of a world they cannot transform and that they do not wish to be a part of. This would be the only answer they can give to a social reality in which it is impossible for them to accomplish their integration.

It is a phenomenon that is given mainly on the male population while being much less frequent in the female population. Indeed, it calls for the attention of whoever studies this problem that approximately three-quarters of *hikikomori* are male. This aspect deserves proper consideration, as we would need to clarify which psychological, physiological and social treats can influence a person to carry out this singular vital alternative. In effect, which of these treats make it so girls can communicate in more efficient ways and be capable of leaving behind the tendency to the isolation they can feel? There are many areas where we can search for the answer to this question. However, in my opinion, a significative element in our approximation to an answer can be found in that throughout history have had more necessity of looking for mutual support and possibly this protection mechanism has helped them to establish efficient communication with other women and, finally, with their social environment. In the other hand,

it doesn't seem crazy to relate this attitude, predominantly masculine, with the actual crisis of masculinity that is expanding and densifying progressively throughout the most developed societies.

In any case, we must remember that confinement allows *hikikomori* living in a space that, even though of reduced size, happens to be protective as well. In it, the insubordination to the world becomes assent towards the geometrical order of the inhabitant. In this way, the inhabitant fuses with the cabin, in a positive alliance that seems to take the simplification of existence to it's purest limit. This is the basis of an interior liberation inside the confines of the place that others consider a prison. But interior freedom is achieved, in this case, by giving up exterior freedom. In this way, *hikikomori* gives up social freedom without, in exchange, regaining natural freedom. Others consider them unsocial beings, savages, but not anymore the kind of savage that Jean Jacques Rousseau talked about.

In the other hand, we could think that diverse fears must converge over the existence of an individual so that they completely isolate themselves from the world. However, in a way the fear to themselves and to others can result eventually productive, contributing to creating an unpublished existential equilibrium.

Paradoxically, a bright resource explainer of the conduct and way of living chosen by *hikikomori*, can be found in the reading of Gustave Flaubert's work, *Sentimental education* (Flaubert 2014). A magistral work, in which the author makes us see the difficulties of the adaptation of a young person to the collective existence. It is true that he talks about what happened in the Europe of the XIX century (Moreau 1803), but that does not prevent the reading of his texts of still being clarifying since the emotional experiences that he tells happen to be the same as the young of the XXI century have to go through.

This novel tells the process of transit towards the adult life of its protagonist, Fréderic Moreau. Said transit is performed through the confrontation of the main character and other young boys and girls with whom he shares his life in a certain way, with each one of the essential aspects of social existence. In each point of said confrontation, he must choose and, after doing so, acting in consequence. In this way, he will discover the social draft of his actions and learn to assume their responsibilities.

Fréderic Moreau wants to escape from all form of isolation, so he refuses to stay in his home village, Nogent, where he could enjoy a peaceful life, committed to familiar tradition and deploying his existence without undergoing the tensions that great personal challenges involve. He does not flee from confrontation with social reality. In its contrary, although he seems

uninterested in facing certain challenges, he does not stop entering other confrontational grounds, sometimes, more difficult and problematic than the aforementioned.

He wishes to live in Paris, but once in there, he also wants to progressively discover the rest of the world, educating his emotivity in confrontation with the daily challenges that life in a big city involve. The place he is going to inhabit is of great importance to him. He prepares it carefully, although not with the intention of being trapped in it, but with the goal of experimenting the sheltering after returning from his daily fight with the established ways of living. He also wants to have an adequate place to share certain experiences with people he really cares about. Ultimately, Flaubert offers us in his novel an excellent description of an experience shared by anyone trying to own their subjectivity. In effect, young people urgently need a private space. Thereupon, we could extend the reach of the thesis narratively developed by Virginia Woolf in *A room of one's own* to all the young. From this perspective, we should consider that *hikikomori* takes to the extreme the necessity of having a private space that all the young from both sexes feel in all its radicality.

The great problem of adaptation to the world that describes the life of the protagonist in Flaubert's novel comes from his difficulties to assume as his own the behaviour that the male role demanded in those years. He experiments great disgust towards the way that women are treated and is not willing to reproduce certain behaviours that in his time were considered inarguably masculine. At the same time, he fears not being understood and loved by the woman he is attracted to if he doesn't behave like a man, that being, according to the established canons. In there radiate the fundaments of his great existential dilemmas. Ultimately, sentimental education ends up consisting of the channelling of the overflowing emotions to the point where society demands it to be driven. Nevertheless, the permanent dissatisfaction that it produces in whom doesn't manage to blend in with the role that society assigns to him generates profound existential conflicts.

The submissive acceptance of the masculine or feminine role involves the aperture towards the possibility of successful integration in the social order, but it implies, at the same time, the intimate acknowledging of the failure of the individual in their commitment to present an alternative subjectivity. They will have to generate a new vital narrative, that allows them to deal with frustration and success in an existential unity that is susceptible to allowing an internal experience that makes the individual feel like life is worth living.

Hikikomori consider that none of these feats are worth the effort and the resignation that, without exception, they all demand. To them, the best way to accept the permanent threat of

failure is not being exposed to it. In their opinion, only those who ignore society will manage to save face. They do nothing other than that when they refuse to leave their room.

Blaise Pascal said that **"**All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." (Pascal, 1897, B 139). *Hikikomori* insist on staying enclosed in their own. They are not sick, but they refuse to do what is most common in collective: pretending to have mental health and balance that very few truly possess. To avoid being pointed at, they shut in themselves in a place where they cannot see the menacing fingers pointed at them.

Their existence implies an ethical challenge for everyone else. In effect, *hikikomori* tell us with their behaviour that social institution and human relations are very far away from what they should be. Their healing could only come from sentimental learning adapted to their mentality. But for such project to be put into practice, *hikikomori* need first and foremost, just like Frédéric Moreau, the main character of *Sentimental education*, to lean on friendship. Without a doubt, it is the emergence of friendship, and the search for common experiences from it, the only thing that can take them from their determination to isolation. If the friendship doesn't arise, which is very common given the extreme difficulty that it involves in this case, the *hikikomori* won't get out voluntarily from their reclusion and society will keep blaming them for their attitude towards life, which is progressively being considered more and more dangerous.

What are hikikomori to blame for?

All approximation to the concept of guilt is a risky and complex task because it involves from start a radical questioning on what we believe we are. In fact, when approaching it we observe its inherent complexity, due to the intersection of levels and factors that bestow its specific trades to all process or action susceptible to provoking or favouring culpability. The juridical, the civic, the religious, the psychological, and the politic, are only some of the fundamental planes that continually intersect in this matter. Furthermore, it must be said that the difficulty that its study poses isn't at all a matter that can be dealt with as if it were merely a theoretical problem. On the contrary, in it, the practical dimension and implications end up developing the theory. In consequence, unsuspicious interactions exist between temporality, action, and responsibility. Because of that, it is not strange that it could be claimed like Roberto Esposito did, that "guilt isn't only the reason, but the result of the sentence" (Esposito 2005, 50). We could say, in fact, that guilt revolves in time, like a snake on the trunk of a tree.

Judith Butler, for her part, notes that "none of us starts the tale of ourselves, nor realizes that for urgent reasons we must become a being that self-narrates unless that question or attribution deriving from another person is dealt with: 'Was it you?'" (Butler 2009, 23-24). An appeal to the culpability that appears already linked to, as it unfailingly is, to the responsibility of the active agent. However, the responsibility, just like the guilt, has both an objective and a subjective dimension. This way, attention is drawn to the complexity of the matter.

Esposito refers to Benjamin and Kafka, on his search for supporting points for the exposition of his ideas. In any case, he willingly submerges himself in this confusion of planes to conclude that "Benjamin refers this sacrificial mechanism to the distinction between the ambit of 'naked life' and the ambit of the 'living', this being, the one that separates themselves from the objectivity of life to become a subject of it. Over the aforementioned is unleashed the violence of the juridical system: in fact, its immune mechanism consists of perpetuating life through the sacrifice of the living" (Esposito 2005, 51). This would imply supporting the defence of life over the permanent threat of ending it, be it a real threat or more of an alibi to justify certain politics that, in definitive, do constitute a real threat to life and some of its manifestations. As we can see, the bet is contradictory but, nevertheless, it has remained in place in different historical moments.

The allusion to sacrifice involves as well the superposition of the plane of the individual subject and of life in general. In history, the examples that allow us to check out how life and subject are sacrificed in the altar of power aren't few. At this point, Esposito keeps going down his interpretation of Benjamin, alluding to "life conserved by its contiguity with death" and, in a parallel way, to "death in the horizon of life" (Esposito 2005, 52-3).

If we have in mind that it has been attempted to see, though Freud, the truth of the individual in desire, that will generate even more inquietude to fully assume its meaning to this affirmation of his: "Violence awakens the vertigo of desire" (Esposito 2005, 56). We could consider, consequentially, that violence would be in the epicentre of community, in a way that is analogous to how it is present inside each individual. Because of that, Esposito thinks that "it could be said that violence is the interior of community that has grown until dilapidatedly overflowing from itself" (Esposito 2005, 56). *Hikikomori* wouldn't escape to that, as in their case violence is mainly directed towards themselves, as an answer to their perception of the aggressive overflowing of social violence.

If violence flows with such ease through the social structure, it's because, in a latent or expressed way, it is already located in each one of its points. "The violence of violence lays not

so much on its arbitrariness nor, precisely, its intensity as its communicability. (Esposito 2005, 56 – 57). This makes it extend like a fluid, permeating gradually more and more the social fabric. When delving into its study, we observe the heterogeneity of its forms, but we determine its presence, latent or expressed, in every corner of society.

Commenting on "The first epistle to the Thessalonians" by Saint Pablo, Esposito points out that "what has the biggest weight -to adhere in a perfect way to the immune paradigm of religion- it is the way it happens, the way evil is stopped: the *katechon* stops evil by containing it in itself. It deals with it, but from the inside: accommodating and accepting it to the point of linking to it its own necessity" Esposito 2005, 93). It introduces like so the paradoxical figure of the individual that carries the collective evil on themselves. In my opinion, that is the same that *hikikomori* do, as I interpret it, it is the *katechon* of our society.

Esposito tells us that *katechon* is "the positive to a negative. The antibody that protects the christian body from what threatens it" (Esposito 2005, 94). We won't talk right now about religion, but we should consider that the generalized loss of trust in religious belief as a key factor in the drive of the conduct of the individuals, is a significative factor to be mindful of. It is true that towards it is increasing religious fanatism in some places. In any case, in the actual context, the katechon of our time could be the *hikikomori*, even if there are other candidates. For that purpose, Roberto Esposito's appreciation is interesting, when he points out that "the categorial epicentre of the katechon is in the crossroad between religion and politics" (Esposito 2005, 96). An area that is without a doubt confusing, complex and always conflictive.

Actual biopolitics, as Michel Foucault has taught us, has evolved from its strategies of control over the population. This previous one is its central subject, as Esposito reminds us of as well. Thereupon, Foucalt "doesn't refer neither to the individual subjects entitled with certain rights, nor to its influence in people conceived as the collective subject of a nation, but to the living being in its specific constitution" (Esposito 2005, 193).

Here we understand that living beings cannot exist as part of a population. Esposito refers to that they all have in common the possession of a body and the inhabiting in a determined space. He poses that "to this body -in an individual time for being unique to each one, and general for being related to every species- is directed the biopolitics in an attempt to protect, empower and reproduce it with a goal that goes beyond the old disciplinary system because it concerns the existence itself of the State in its 'interest', at the same time economical, juridical, and politic" (Esposito 2005, 194).

The central place of the body understood as the land where the never-ending combat of

biopolitics unfolds, shouldn't make us forget that that very place is the one that, from the most strictly individual, opens the possibility of a new collective strategy. The power is directed towards that land, where the subject and the species intersect becoming a population. Because of that, Esposito evokes the classical doctrine of civil rights, to remind us that it establishes that "the human body is not juridically misunderstood with the thing. The starting point of this distinction is the roman *suma divisio* between *personae* and *res*: only of the last ones, the first ones can appropriate" (Esposito 2007, 136). That is how it frequently happens in actual society, where devotion for things drives frequently to the reification of the individuals.

The body, adds Esposito, cannot belong to others, neither to the "subject that coincides with the dimension of being and not the one of having -the body is not something you possess, but something you are" (Esposito 2007, 136). Beyond the confrontation with the psychological dualism, the meaning of the previous statement by Roberto Esposito has a history and it encompasses metaphysical aspects as well as moral aspects. If we are body, instead of having a body, all power that is exerted from the outside of the individual towards their body, involves the possession or at least the attempt of possession of the very individual.

In the current biopolitical crossroad, the *hikikomori* poses with its own existence questions that are certainly disturbing, but it also opens the way to find answers to others that haunt us and we do not know how to approach them. We can pity the harsh existence they have chosen, but it wouldn't be fair to blame them for their decision.

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