

Francesc Torralba

The essence and forms of fear in hypermodernity

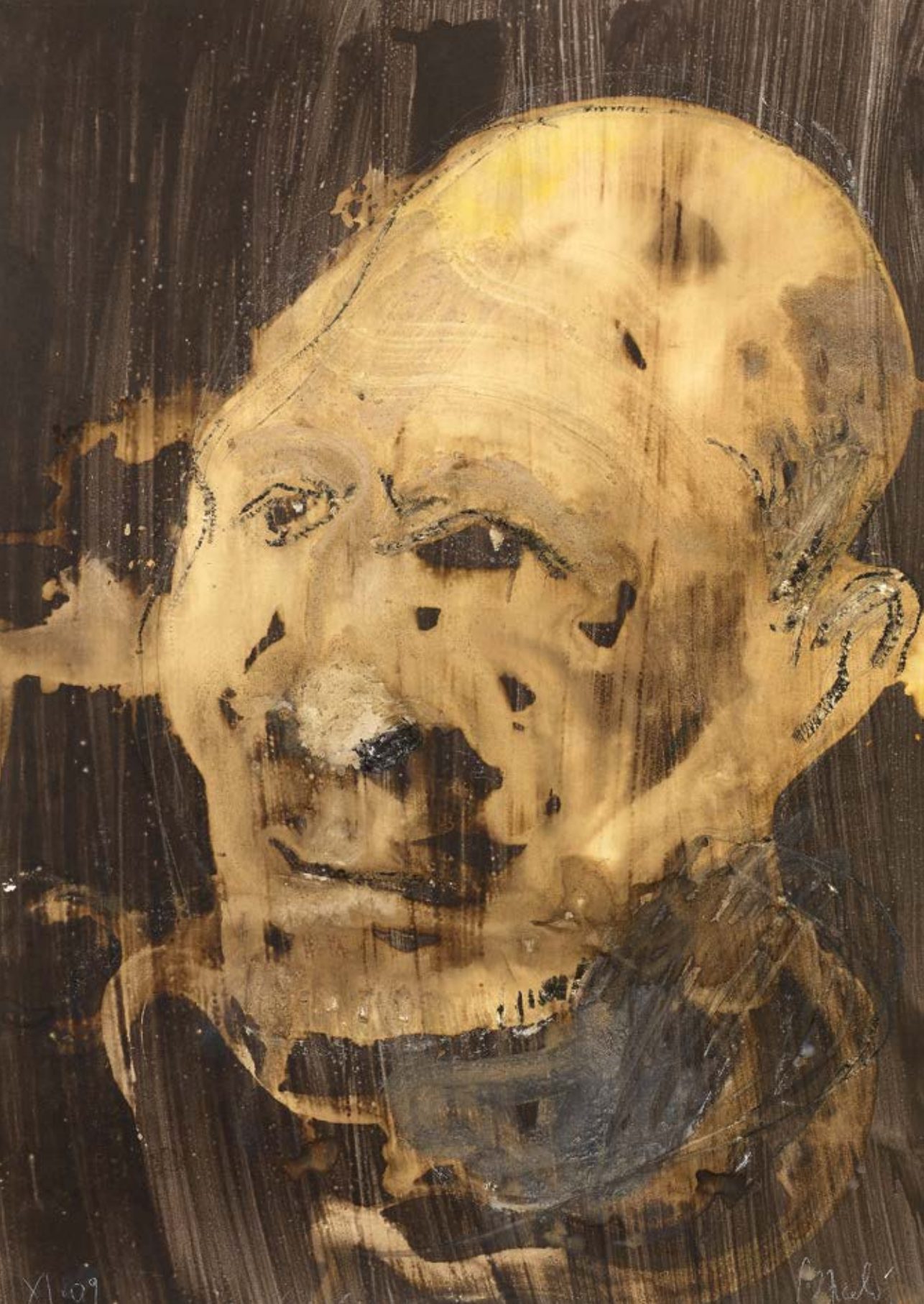
Much has been written in recent years about one of the passions that contemporary citizens suffer from, which, in itself, is not new, but which takes on very diverse forms and ways of expression in our times¹. I am referring to fear.

1. THE ANATOMY OF FEAR

In classical treatises of philosophical anthropology fear is treated as a universal human characteristic, like a commonplace or point where all the various manifestations of the human condition come together. Fear, directly linked to the awareness of mortality, is not, however, a uniquely human emotion, although in human beings it has very specific characteristics and traits. It is not my intention to state one by one the philosophical roots of the emotion that grips all human beings to some degree, but I do propose to present the forms fear takes in our times.

Fear, like being, like love or evil, is called many things and obeys different pretexts. It does not respond solely to an efficient cause, and it expresses itself in many ways. To go into this plural causality and this formal diversity goes far beyond the limits

■ ¹ It is especially enlightening to consult: BAUMAN, Z., *Miedo líquido*. Paidós, Barcelona 2009; and TODOROV, T., *La por dels bàrbars*, Pagès Editors, Lleida 2010.



X109

M. K.

of this article. The ways human beings have imagined in order to free themselves from this emotion, even though provisionally, are also very complex. All human beings, at some time in their lives, experience fear and, against it, they need to develop mechanisms of salvation, using those that their culture or their immediate surroundings offer them.

It would seem a priori that fear is a sentiment more in keeping with the pre-scientific age than the technological era and yet fear, in a vague but persistent way, spreads into all areas of collective life. There is fear in the macro-sphere that has to do with the world's ecological crisis, but there is also fear in the micro-sphere, that of the citizen walking down a dark narrow street, afraid of being attacked. There is fear in lucrative organisations, but also in the more intimate sphere, in the home, the fear of losing bonds, of not being well enough prepared to compete and that of losing importance and prestige in social life. Obviously, I am not proposing to make an exhaustive inventory of the fears that besiege hypermodern citizens nowadays, but to identify, at least, the most important ones² and to point out some keys to overcoming them.

We are afraid of what we cannot plan, control and calculate: everything that slips through the net of rationality

At the present time, fear takes forms quite different from those in pre-modern times. In Antiquity people feared the wrath of the gods in the form of natural devastations; they felt unprotected, exposed to the elements. They were ignorant of the laws that govern nature and had no tools to control it, or subject it. They were at the mercy of the gods and the natural inclemency of the weather. They believed that

their moral transgressions would awaken the vengeance of the gods and that they had to protect themselves from their responses. In the primitive era, fear was linked directly to the supernatural forces and their ability to devastate the small human cosmoses.

In hypermodernity, the gods have been wiped off the horizon and nature is described according to universal laws. We no longer fear the gods of Antiquity or the madness of nature, but other forms of fear proliferate. There is fear of organisations, fear of job insecurity, fear of losing one's health, fear due to the inconsistency of ties. New scenarios of this threat appear, new tales of future devastations that strike fear into the average citizen.

The reasons for fear in the present are different from those in the past, but we have not been able to banish this passion that spoils the possibilities of being happy in this world. What truly causes fear is not nature, but the use that human beings are capable of making of it and the devastating consequences that the technological colonisation of the living world may have. We are no longer frightened by the gods, but by what human beings are capable of doing and legitimating in the name of the gods.

There is, logically, a series of fears that persist and are the direct consequence of human vulnerability, of the mortal condition and the unbearable lightness of their being, to use Milan Kundera's beautiful expression³. Fear is caused by suffering, deterioration, dependence, death (one's own or that of loved ones), and marginalisation, exile and

oblivion. However, these fears are not a new phenomenon, but epiphanies of human vulnerability. We are afraid of what we cannot control, dominate, calculate, anticipate and plan: everything that slips through the net of rationality. Not for nothing, in cultural contexts in which the fragility of reason is an essential note, fear increases significantly. We mistrust its power to deliver us from evil.

We have ceased to believe in traditional religion, but also in the potential of modern reason. Precisely because we have no control over mortality, we prefer to hide it, disguise it, even neglect it, but the fears that emanate from the awareness of mortality, of fragility, flourish and burst in despite the antidotes and analgesics.

2. THE ESSENCE OF FEAR. FOOTNOTES TO DESCARTES AND HUME

Throughout the history of modern thought, this passion has not been, precisely, the subject of too many articles. Unlike other passions, like love, hate, compassion, cruelty, sadness or joy, fear has occupied a marginal place in treatises on the passions that the most illustrious modern thinkers have left us. Among them, there are the thoughts of René Descartes and David Hume.

René Descartes, in article 176 of *The Passions of the Soul*, refers to the use of fear and says: “As for fear or terror, I don’t see that it can ever be praiseworthy or useful. So it’s not a particular passion, but merely an excess of shrinking reluctance, wonder and anxiety—an excess that is always unvirtuous, just as boldness is an excess of courage that is always good (provided the end proposed is good)”. And he adds, “Because the principal cause of fear is surprise, there’s no better way to avoid it than to think ahead and prepare oneself for any eventuality that one might fear”.

According to the father of modern philosophy, fear is neither a virtue nor an excellence of character, but rather a human weakness, a form of poverty of the soul that is produced when a surprise bursts in, something we were not expecting and do not know how to deal with. Fear, therefore, is cured with premeditation, calculation, anticipation, the practice of rationality. However, it must be said that, even when premeditation works properly, surprise may break into life, because not everything that will happen can be anticipated through the imagination. It would seem then that rationality is able to moderate fear, but not eradicate it.

The best-known empiricist philosopher, David Hume, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, says: “The passions of fear and hope can arise when the chances on the two sides are equal. In such a situation the passions are at their strongest, because the mind there has the least foundation to rest on and is tossed about by the greatest uncertainty”⁴.

And he adds, “Thus all kinds of uncertainty are strongly connected with fear, even when they don’t cause any opposition of passions coming from opposite features of the situation or ways of looking at it”⁵.

■ ² I use G. LIPOVETSKY’S expression. *Los tiempos hipermodernos*, Anagrama, Barcelona 2008.

³ Cf. KUNDERA, M., *La insostenible lleugeresa de l’ésser*, Destino, Barcelona 1986.

⁴ *Tractat de la naturalesa humana*, II, 443. I cite the critical edition.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 446.

Finally, David Hume concludes, “Whatever causes any fluctuation or mixture of passions that has any degree of unpleasure in the mix always produces fear, or at least a passion so like fear that they can hardly be told apart”⁶.

The empiricist thinker relates fear and uncertainty directly: “But this mechanism connecting fear with uncertainty goes even further: Any doubt produces fear, even if it’s a doubt about whether A or B or C will happen, when each of them is good and desirable”⁷.

This close relationship between fear and uncertainty has been greatly exploited in modern times. If it is true, as has been written, that we live in the society of uncertainty and risk⁸, it is no surprise, then, that the feeling of fear should grow, because there is a directly proportional relationship between both. In hypermodern times, citizens suffer greater uncertainty than in the immediate past and this not knowing, this constituent fragility, generates in them a state of fear that can properly be called anxiety.

Fear and anxiety do not influence a person’s behaviour in the same way, even though both seemingly characterise a mood typical of citizens in the hypermodern age.

3. HYPERMODERN FORMS OF FEAR

It is not possible, in an article of this scope, to identify the diversity of forms that fear takes at the present time. Let us identify the most important, stressing that some of the current forms have coexisted throughout the history of humankind and are constituent aspects of the finite and contingent structure of the human being.

Fear of Death. Death causes fear because it means the end of the biological process and coming into contact with uncertainty. These days, fear is not aroused by stories from beyond the grave or by threatening eschatological symbolism, but by the fact of ceasing to be, of disappearing from this world. We are afraid of death, but especially of growing old, decrepitude and any form of future dependence.

Death, as sociologists and cultural analysts have been showing for over three decades, has become an immense taboo, a forbidden, almost scandalous topic. It makes us afraid because we cannot control, despite all our efforts, either the time or the place; nor can we anticipate what will cause it and we do not know whether we will have realised our personal projects when it comes. Death causes fear now, due not to being afraid of a last judgement, but to the degree of uncertainty that accompanies the experience.

Fear of death entails, indirectly, an obsessive cult of wholesome living, a good diet and healthy lifestyles. It also generates, as a consequence, the sacralisation of the instant as the only guarantee of happiness.

Fear of the Strange. Fear is caused by the worrying presence of the strange, ignorance of its intentions and reasons, its customs and its ways of life. In host societies like Europe the fear subsists of losing our own values, of dissolving in a sort of empty multiculturalism.

■ ⁶ Ibid, p. 447.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. BECK, U., *La sociedad del riesgo global*. Siglo, XXI, Madrid 2002.

The strange is always a violent presence, because it questions our own ways, because it demands we find a common language and guarantee minimum laws for good social coexistence. At the same time, though, it is also an opportunity to reflect on our own identity, on the collective singularity. Never before has it been so utterly difficult to define ourselves.

This fear is not, of course, new in the history of Western civilisation, but in contexts of intense migratory flows like the present one, it once again bursts in and generates attitudes of putting up barriers, of social autism that turns the host society into an impermeable and static body. Phobia of foreigners can easily be turned into hatred of their presence. When this metamorphosis takes place, social cohesion is dismantled and barbarity bursts in.

Today's citizens seem to be threatened by the result of the labour of their hands or by the working of their intelligence

Fear of Technology. Today's citizens seem to be always threatened by what they produce, namely, by the result of the labour of their hands and, even more so, by the working of their intelligence. Too often, the results of this multiple activity are translated into objects of alienation, in other words they are quite simply wrenched away from the person who has produced them; but at least partially, in the indirect line of their effects. These results are turned against people; they are directed or can be directed against them. This seems to be the principal chapter of the drama of contemporary human existence.

The fact is that ordinary people are increasingly more afraid. They are afraid that their products may be directed radically against themselves; they are afraid that they may be turned into means and instruments of an unimaginable self-destruction, compared to which all the cataclysms and the catastrophes in history that we know of pale. In this fear, exploited narratively in modern films, the echoes of Emmanuel Mounier⁹ and Karl Jaspers still resonate¹⁰.

This state of threat against people by their products has several directions and degrees of intensity. It seems, fortunately, that we are ever more aware of the fact that the exploitation of the Earth, of the planet we live on, demands rational and honest planning. At the same time, this exploitation for not just industrial but also military ends, and the development of technology, neither controlled nor framed in a plan of international scope and authentically humanistic, often leads to the threat to the environment, it alienates people in their relationship with nature and separates them from it.

The pre-eminence of what the thinkers of the first generation of the School of Frankfurt called instrumental reason (*die instrumentelle Vernunft*) is obvious¹¹. It seems that human beings only perceive in the environment the meanings that

■ ⁹ Cf. MOUNIER, E., *La petita por del segle XX.*, Edicions 62, Barcelona 1976.

¹⁰ Cf. JASPERS K., *La bomba atómica y el futuro del hombre*, Taurus, Barcelona 1966.

¹¹ Cf. HORKHEIMER, M., *Crítica de la razón instrumental*, Trotta, Madrid 2002.



are useful for the purposes of immediate use and consumption. The progress of technology and the development of civilisation, marked by the control of technology, demand a proportional development of ethics. In recent times, concern over the global ecological crisis has aroused an ethical reflection centred on the principle of responsibility and on attention and care for the coming generations¹².

Fear of Failure. In the society of success, the fear of failure, of losing social and economic status, emerges forcefully. A growing intolerance of failure and a sacralisation of success in social and economic terms has been detected¹³.

Failure means a conscious subject who has set himself a goal that he feels is possible, to which he has energetically applied means that he feels are adequate; this goal has been achieved and the subject realises this. Insensitivity, moral anaesthesia and indifference diminish the awareness of failure. Failure always depends on what we attach our aspirations to, on what we see as success. Failure, like evil, is such insofar as it represents a threat to our identity; it will depend, then, on what we think realises us, what makes us. What we consider as failure will help us to understand what we are and, the other way round, what we are will make us consider something a failure or not.

Success and failure can be an opportunity never to finish, never to restart, not to get a grip on oneself and open up a real future. The melancholy of failure and the obsession with

success are two evils of finalising: two ways of not knowing how to finish in order to be able, by sorting oneself out, to beat new paths. Failure is undeniably an evil because it is a sign of vulnerability, of imperfection, of the inability to adapt and of suffering, but it is also a good because it is the condition of any awareness and progress. It is necessary to have failed and to be aware of it in order to know oneself and to realise oneself.

The people who fail, who do not manage to realise their project, may adopt a conduct of failure that, as has been said many times (Janet, Nabert, Lacroix) has to be distinguished from the reaction to failure. In the conduct of failure all creative activity is paralyzed, whether due to cowardice, whether due to a monotonous repetition of the attitude that has led to failure. The reaction to failure on the other hand, gets the activity back on course and profoundly regenerates it.

Loneliness or being rejected by the group can cause fear: ties are ephemeral and this arouses great anxiety

■ ¹² Cf. JONAS, H., *El principio de responsabilidad*, Paidós, Barcelona 1995; and PONTARA, G., *Ética y generaciones futuras*, Ariel, Barcelona 1990.

¹³ On this matter, it is interesting to retrieve the old essay by J. LACROIX, *El fracaso*, Nova Terra, Barcelona 1967.

Fear of Freedom. Since Erich Fromm published his well-known essay *Fear of Freedom*, the ways and styles of life in Western societies have changed significantly¹⁴.

Nevertheless, the fear of personal self-determination, of exercising one's own autonomy, of defending one's own convictions in such liquid and inconsistent contexts as postmodern scenarios, is growing significantly. We live in an age in which defending solid ideas like freedom, truth, dignity or even equality arouses a certain fear as we are crossing the line of what is politically correct, of that which travels along the highways of official thinking.

Fear of freedom in the age of civil liberties does not cease to be a paradox, but it is a manifest fact. Being unusual in the world has never been easy, but being so in a world marked by global ideologies that, as never before, cross over frontiers and countries, is even more difficult and requires greater character. Therefore, the fear of freedom is, at heart, a clear consequence of the crisis of character¹⁵.

Fear of Loneliness. As Zygmunt Bauman has made clear in his sociological analyses, interpersonal ties, social and affective relationships are characterised, in the present, by their fragility and inconsistency. They are, essentially, liquid ties¹⁶. They are made and unmade, they have expiry dates. And this, the consequence of a great sense of personal autonomy, in turn generates a terrible fear.

Loneliness, isolation, being rejected by the group, all cause fear. Ties are ephemeral and this arouses great anxiety, even in the form of pathological worry, because people do not want to lose the bonds of affection that make their emotional balance possible, but they are not prepared to give of themselves wholeheartedly, to commit themselves solidly to their partner. The fear of loneliness in the younger generations results in the intolerance of loneliness, in an impenitent need to be permanently connected.

This view, so utterly negative, of loneliness makes it impossible to recognise the beauty and the benefits for the soul that the state of loneliness also generates¹⁷.

4. EXCURSUS ON ANXIETY

When Søren Kierkegaard wrote *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), he could hardly have imagined that the idea of anxiety would become a key aspect for understanding the 20th century and, by extension, the heart of hypermodernity as well.

As we learn from his psychological and theological analysis, anxiety is not a passion but a mood, a more profound inhibiting reality, often lacking an objective that reduces the control of one's own acts and, consequently, responsibility.

Anxiety, which is an extremely complex mood, is a persistent emotion of the subject who feels threatened in his supposed integrity, its synthesis having become a habit, to invite or force him to accede to an unknown phase of its development. This phase may be better,

■ ¹⁴ Cf. FROMM, E., *La por a la llibertat*, Edicions 62, Barcelona 1979.

¹⁵ Cf. SENNET, R., *La corrosión del carácter*, Anagrama, Barcelona 2009.

¹⁶ Cf. BAUMAN, Z., *Amor líquido. Acerca de la fragilidad de los vínculos humanos*, FCE, Madrid 2007.

¹⁷ I have dealt with this matter in *L'art de saber estar sol*, Pagès Editors, Lleida 2009.

but subjectively at least it is experienced as a risk, as a possible loss, as a possible defeat or failure.

This mood, so common in liquid societies, is based, objectively, on the conflict arising between the new situation and the old, subjectively on the ambivalence of all that is human and which people themselves have to resolve, directing their tendencies through their freedom and giving meaning to everything.

Anxiety, as Kirkegaard described it, is an antipathetic sympathy and a sympathetic antipathy. Indeed, there is a sympathetic side to anxiety. It is the discovery of human ambivalence, of the fact that in human beings nothing is determined to begin with, automatic or definitive, but they must give meaning and a life of its own to everything. This feeling, always provisional, is open to new discoveries, because as historical and limited beings, human beings do not hold the keys to explaining the future.

The dialectic of anxiety lies in the tension between the fear of losing security and being alone, isolated, lacking affection, and the fear of gaining access to newness, to independence, due to the risk that this entails. Independence, the assimilation of new things, is necessary for human beings in times like ours, in which everything ages rapidly, as only thus can they develop gradually and freely. The risk or insecurity that personal responsibility may bring with it, due to the fact of facing up to successes and failures, gives citizens a more exact, much more vital awareness of their own being and limitations, awareness that lies at the heart of constructing their inner selves in a realistic way and, therefore, of being in true possession of themselves, of being their own masters.

5. AGAINST FEAR, BRAVERY AND FORTITUDE

Fear is a passion awakened in the face of a foreseeable evil. It easily blinds reason, distorts judgement and diminishes the ability to control. Whether fear caused externally weakens freedom and responsibility will depend on whether or not this fear, once internalised, throws the inner balance into confusion. If free will and rationality are not imposed on the nascent fear, the person may lose their sovereignty and it may be the beginning of many capitulations and servitudes.

The object of fear is an evil difficult to resist or something good that appears disguised as evil. The stoics considered it a weakness. In Aristotelian ethics, the passions as such, that is, the movements of the sensory appetite, should be neither praised nor condemned. Indeed, the passions, moderated by reason, are good because they help to avoid evil and follow good.

Aristotelian ethics confronts fear with another passion, which at the same time is a virtue, bravery. It is the passion that launches us into the face of danger, in order to defeat it. However, if this movement is contrary to rationality in its practical usage, it becomes temerity. And just as bravery is born of hope, fear engenders despair, which must be defeated by hope.

**We don't have a sure
antidote to fear, but we do
have habits to administer
it intelligently and escape
from its servitude**

In the classical understanding of the virtues, which has been revived by authors as different as Alasdair McIntyre, Josef Pieper or Vladimir Jankélévitch, the virtue that controls fears and moderates braveries is fortitude. It is a cardinal virtue as it provides the dynamism and firmness that allow us to exercise all the virtues. It is the virtue of courage. It enables us to throw ourselves into accomplishing a difficult enterprise and to keep up a constant effort. But fortitude, in order to come to fruition, presupposes and entails other subordinate virtues like self-confidence (trust), the search for the great things that honour (magnanimity), patience and perseverance provide. Without these virtues fortitude is inconceivable.

Despite the fact that fear is an instinctive movement of self-defence and an incitement to flee with respect to what may be an evil in itself, fear, by nature, leads rather to a flawed extreme than to a healthy balance. In today's world, the undertaking of the construction and awakening of our being is under threat as never before. Problems and situations are becoming increasingly complex. Risks are growing and certainties are crumbling. We move within an ambiguity that seems to be one of the characteristics and constant features of our existence. All in all it leads us to attitudes of fear.

From an ethic and an aesthetic based on fear we have to go, to my way of thinking, to an ethic of fortitude. That, however, is only possible if this passion is identified, i.e., if we become aware of it. If life is a constant risk in the possibility of different options, fear must give way to hope. The courage of fortitude is not the equivalent of being afraid of nothing, but of mastering fear so that it does not become inhibiting and destructive panic. In short, it also teaches us to unmask false prudence, false peace and certainty. We do not have a sure antidote to fear, but we do have habits and strategies to fence it in, administer it intelligently and escape from its servitude II

Francesc Torralba is a philosopher and theologian,
lecturer at the Ramon Llull University (Barcelona).



MOUSSA

X1.01

P. P. P.