



Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

On 5 April 2020, Belly Mujinga, a forty-seven-year-old London transport worker, died of Covid-19. According to her own account, she was infected at work in Victoria Station, where a passenger told her that he had the virus and spat in her face. BBC News quotes the Prime Minister's Office describing this as "despicable" and an unnamed source describing it as a "tragic incident." (1) These reactions are ethically unfocused: if someone who knew he had Covid spat at Belly Mujinga, causing her to contract the virus and die as a result, he should now be serving a hefty prison sentence for second-

degree murder. Victoria Station is equipped with CCTV, and there were scores of witnesses at the scene. No shortage of evidence, then, but the subsequent investigation concluded that it was insufficient and inconsistent. (2) Belly Mujinga was a black woman worker and the person who allegedly spat at her was a white man. The intersections of race, gender, and class here are complex and compelling, but what I want to focus on are the ethics of the people who described his action as “despicable,” “tragic,” and an “incident,” and of the society in which these things are unremarkable. Spitting in somebody’s face is despicable; doing so when you know you have Covid is more than that. If twenty people die in a flood, that can be reasonably described as a “tragic incident,” but to use that phrase in this case implicitly denies the moral dimension of a deliberate attack resulting in death.

On 18 December 2021, the top-seed Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic, who has refused to be vaccinated, attended an interview and photo-shoot, in breach of the rule to self-isolate after having been informed that he had tested positive for Covid. He later admitted that this was “an error of judgement.” Did he apologize to the people whom he had knowingly exposed to Covid-19? Apparently not. The Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić said Djokovic’s action was “a clear breach of the rules.” (3) Will there be any legal consequences? If not, why not? If I threw a brick out of a tenth-floor window in a busy metropolis, I would be arrested for reckless endangerment, regardless of whether the brick injured anyone. What is the moral difference between throwing the brick and attending indoor public events in the knowledge that you have Covid?

According to *The Guardian*, on 22 January 2022, the former US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who has refused to be vaccinated, ate indoors at Elio’s restaurant in Manhattan, despite regulations that require proof of vaccination to eat indoors. The following Wednesday, she was seen eating outside at the same restaurant, even though she had tested positive for Covid and should have been self-isolating. (4) I suspect that, if I told Sarah Palin that her behavior was like that of an HIV patient who conceals the fact and continues to have unprotected sex, (5) she would be outraged. What is the moral difference between the two?

In retrospect, Sarah Palin’s vice-presidential candidacy in 2008 seems a sinister foreshadowing of Donald Trump’s election in 2016. The democratic elections of Donald Trump in the USA, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Boris Johnson in the UK signal a profound ethical problem in the western world. That Hitler and Mussolini were also democratically elected suggests that this is not new. I am not making the left-wing mistake of equating politicians like Palin and Trump with Nazis and Fascists; I am simply pointing out that people whose ethics can be summed up in the sentence “What I like is right and

what I don't like is wrong" have attracted wide political support for the past century.

In 1954, Albert Einstein wrote a brief essay for radio broadcast called "An Ideal of Service to Our Fellow Man," in which he deplored the rise of competitive egoism and the decline of cooperative solidarity:

The individual feels more than ever dependent on society, but he feels this dependence not in the positive sense — cradled, connected as part of an organic. He sees it as a threat to his natural rights and even his economic existence. His position in society, then, is such that that which drives his ego is encouraged and developed, and that which would drive him toward other men (a weak impulse to begin with) is left to atrophy.

It is my belief that there is only one way to eliminate these evils, namely, the establishment of a planned economy coupled with an education geared towards social goals. Alongside the development of individual abilities, the education of the individual aspires to revive an ideal that is geared towards the service of our fellow man, and that needs to take the place of the glorification of power and outer success. (6)

That Einstein—a German Jew who had emigrated to the United States to escape Nazism—articulated that opinion in a radio broadcast while the House Committee for Un-American Activities was still in full swing was a striking example of the ethical behavior he advocates. Although he makes clear earlier in the essay that he is not a communist ("I sense that it is not the State that has intrinsic value in the machinery of humankind, but rather the creative, feeling individual, the personality alone that creates the noble and sublime"), the unmistakably socialist flavor of his suggested solution to the problem could well have caused him to be persecuted and ostracized in his adopted country as he had been in his homeland. He clearly felt that the risk was worth taking because the message was an important one. Now – nearly seventy years later – it is even more important.

I'm no Mother Teresa, but I try to avoid selfishness. When I fail, I feel ashamed. I grew up in the sixties and came of age in the seventies. Along with many others of that generation, I have always believed that shame is a harmful destructive emotion that has been cultivated and exploited by powerful institutions (the Church, for example) for self-serving motives. In the light of what I have been discussing here, I am now wondering if shame is a completely bad thing: perhaps there is, after all, a

role for shame. Certainly, shamelessness is one of the most powerful and pernicious elements in western culture today.

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## Endnotes

1. "Coronavirus."
2. The investigation and its coverage were indeed complicated and contradictory (see, for example, "Belly Mujinga" and BBC Panorama Team): many contradictory claims were made, some of which tended to discredit Belly Mujinga. These should be considered with one important thing in mind: Belly Mujinga's version of events was profoundly embarrassing to at least two powerful institutions – her employers and the British government. What matters here is the reaction to her account of events: the people who described the attack as "despicable" and a "tragic incident" were not doubting the verity of the account; they were underestimating the ethical significance of such an attack.
3. Horton.
4. Anguiano.
5. In 2020, John Nehemiah Rodney was sent to prison for eight years for grievous bodily harm in Britain for infecting three women with HIV ("Man Jailed"). In 2009, Johnson Agiza was the first person to be convicted of murder for infecting seven women with HIV, two of whom subsequently died of AIDS, in Canada ("Guilty Verdict"). Both Rodney and Agiza are black. I am not pointing this out to suggest that they should not have been convicted but rather to suggest that white ruling-class people should be judged by the same criteria that are applied to everyone else: Rodney and Agiza deserved their sentences; in a fair and just world, Djokovic and Palin would be sentenced too.
6. Einstein.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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