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Tim Christiaens

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## Precarity as a mode of being-in-the-world in Michel Houellebecq's *Possibilité d'une île*

Tim Christiaens 

Philosophy of Culture and Economic Ethics, Department of Philosophy, Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

Michel Houellebecq's *Anéantir* has received mixed reviews. Houellebecq's focus on loving intimacy and care for the elderly within the nuclear family allegedly showcases his transformation from an embittered critic of the capitalist status quo to an apolitical novelist interested in the private sphere. I argue that this criticism overlooks Houellebecq's concerns about old age and love in his earlier novels and how they relate to his social critique. Particularly Houellebecq's *Possibilité d'une île* presents a critique of lonely precarity as the dominant mode of being-in-the-world today. Though critics of post-Fordism have already described post-Fordist forms of life as opportunistic, fearful, and cynical, Houellebecq adds that this uncertain marketized lifestyle also leads to bitterness that increases with old age. By confronting Houellebecq's phenomenology of contemporary life to Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*, I argue that, whereas Heidegger highlights the role of anxiety and death in fostering a sense of meaning to human existence, Houellebecq rather argues that such an authentic confrontation with death has become impossible in contemporary culture and that love is instead the emotional tonality most responsive to the cultivation of a meaningful good life.

### RÉSUMÉ

*Anéantir* de Michel Houellebecq a reçu des critiques mixtes. L'accent mis sur l'intimité amoureuse et les soins aux personnes âgées au sein de la famille nucléaire témoigne prétendument de la transformation de l'écrivain de critique désenchanté du statu quo capitaliste en romancier apolitique intéressé à la sphère privée. Je soutiens que cette critique néglige les préoccupations de Houellebecq concernant la vieillesse et l'amour dans ses premiers romans et la façon dont elles sont liées à sa critique sociale. En particulier, *Possibilité d'une île* présente une critique de la précarité solitaire comme mode d'être-au-monde dominant d'aujourd'hui. Bien que les critiques du post-fordisme ont déjà décrit la forme de vie post-fordiste comme opportuniste, craintive et cynique, Houellebecq ajoute que ce mode de vie incertain et commercialisé entraîne également une amertume qui augmente avec la vieillesse. En confrontant la phénoménologie de la vie contemporaine de Houellebecq à l'analyse du *Dasein* de Heidegger, je soutiens que, tandis que Heidegger met en évidence le rôle de l'anxiété et de la mort dans la promotion d'un sentiment

**CONTACT** Tim Christiaens  t.christiaens@tilburguniversity.edu  Philosophy of Culture and Economic Ethics, Department of Philosophy, Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands

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sens de l'existence humaine, Houellebecq soutient plutôt qu'une telle confrontation authentique avec la mort est devenue impossible dans la culture contemporaine et que l'amour est au contraire la tonalité émotionnelle la plus sensible à la culture d'une bonne vie significative.

You put on a dress, you put on lipstick, or you can get lost.

– Marilyn Monroe

## Has Michel Houellebecq lost his edge?

In the acknowledgements of *Anéantir*, Michel Houellebecq ends with 'il est temps que je m'arrête' (Houellebecq 2022, 734), a statement that presents *Anéantir* as his final novel. Such a remark invites Houellebecq's readers to take stock of his entire oeuvre and its internal development. Though the novelist has succeeded at creating a *monde houellebecqien* recognizable across different media (Crowley 2002, 18), this world changes appearance several times.<sup>1</sup> Houellebecq's trademark Islamophobia is absent from his first novels, his interest in French (presidential) politics is a constant from *Soumission* onward (2015), the literary experiments with transhumanism and genetic enhancement appear in the late 1990s but vanish after *La possibilité d'une île* (2005). Such retrospective overviews are especially interesting in light of the negative critical response to *Anéantir*. Some critics argue that Houellebecq has lost his edge (Roussel 2021; Caglioli 2022). The biting satire of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) has receded into the background in favour of a mellow and meandering tone. Its central themes focus on the nuclear family, emphasizing care for the elderly and the strengths of romantic and familial love. These are not topics one would expect of a supposedly controversial novelist. As Sabine Audrerie writes, 'on perçoit une forme de détente chez l'écrivain. Le cynisme, l'écho de la crudité du réel, est bien là mais comme atténué par une recherche de paix, ouvrant à la tendresse' (Audrerie 2022).

Beyond the mere expression of disappointment, Anton Jäger's appraisal for *New Left Review* links the change in style to Houellebecq's altered class position (Jäger 2022). He mentions the novelist's close friendship to the French centrist politician Bruno Le Maire and Houellebecq's own admission of having a financial interest in voting for Emanuel Macron in the 2022 presidential elections. This is hardly the radical political outlook one would expect of an *enfant terrible* of the French literary scene nor is it the politics one would have predicted by reading Houellebecq's early-career novels, like *Extension du domaine de la lutte* or *Particules élémentaires* (1998). Those books gave rise to a significant left-wing anti-capitalist reception in France.<sup>2</sup> Though Houellebecq's oeuvre has always had a reactionary character, his work was also considered to be a damning critique of contemporary capitalism and its propensity to make life meaningless and precarious.<sup>3</sup> However, according to Jäger, 'it is grating to see a writer once antinomic to the ruling order now appear essentially subdued by it' (2022). Houellebecq has allegedly become a petty bourgeois ideologue from whose novels the anti-capitalist impulse has faded with the author's rising fame and wealth

. Rather than a plebeian indictment of the socio-political status quo, *Anéantir* is a story about middle-class families detached from social history, who worry about the well-being of their elderly relatives and celebrate the virtues of love and intimacy in the nuclear family.

I argue that this criticism overlooks elements in Houellebecq's previous novels that, with the benefit of hindsight, show the close connection between, on the one hand, Houellebecq's anti-capitalist critique of modernity and, on the other hand, his concern for the well-being of the elderly and his celebration of romantic and familial love. Whereas Jäger presents these two elements as mutually exclusive—either anti-capitalism or petty bourgeois values of the nuclear family—I argue that Houellebecq's oeuvre often combines both, which implies that his championing of love and family are not as conformistic as they seem. He criticizes contemporary capitalism for the ways it renders human life precarious. The breakdown of elderly care and familial love are symptoms of this precarization of life. One novel where this connection is particularly clear is the 2005 novel *Possibilité d'une île*, which will be the text studied in this paper.<sup>4</sup>

The novel tells the story of Daniel, a formerly successful comedian and tv-personality with an unfortunate love-life, and Daniels 24 and 25, his clones two thousand years later. Daniel is a sarcastic critic of contemporary society: he believes the sexual liberation of the 1960s has not just broken the hold of social traditions, but has also cleared the path for capitalist competition to invade all intimate relations (Morrey 2013, 68; Sweeney 2013, 41; Betty 2019, 30). Sexuality is allegedly a market where love has become a quasi-contractual arrangement (Abecassis 2000, 811; Betty 2016, 9; Willging 2020, 25). Over the duration of the novel, Daniel meets two women with whom he has intimate relations: Isabelle, the editor of a teen magazine with a similar outlook on life, and Esther, a much younger beautiful woman who has completely embraced the marketization of social life. Both relations end tragically, as is to be expected in a Houellebecq novel. Daniel turns to the New Age cult of the Elohimites, first out of curiosity and later for personal comfort. The cult promises immortality and eternal youth by cloning its followers and encouraging them to commit ritualized suicide when their bodies start to age. This venture also proves to be disappointing and, by the end, Daniel loses hope and commits suicide. This story is interwoven with commentaries of Daniel's cloned descendants, Daniels 24 and 25. By that time, the Earth has become a nuclear wasteland and the human race is on the brink of extinction. Only the cloned and genetically enhanced neo-humans descending from the Elohimite cult have comfortably survived in lonely bunkers. But life has become dull and flat. Daniel 25 ultimately leaves his compound, together with his cloned dog Fox, in search of fellow neo-humans. He finds some joy in the wilderness, but eventually comes to terms with his own mortality after his expedition fails.

From this short summary, one can already see that themes of love and old age are not new to Houellebecq, but I will additionally argue that they play a key role in Houellebecq's critique of contemporary capitalism. They contextualize his phenomenology of social precarity in *Possibilité d'une île*. Houellebecq's description of precarious life shows how the longing for de commodified communities of care, based on romantic or familial love, is not a recent invention of a Houellebecq-turned-bourgeois, but a recurring motive even in his earlier, explicitly anti-capitalist novels. Social precarity is the prism that connects Houellebecq's critique of contemporary capitalism and his championing of love and care as responses to capitalist alienation. In social theory, it is common knowledge that specifically post-Fordist capitalist culture entails increased

social precarity (Sassen 2014; Standing 2014; Lorey 2015; Nachtwey 2018). The latter does not just concern precarious job opportunities, but also insecure social status, the dissolution of social bonds, unstable marriages, etc. The more life itself is subsumed under market forces, the more living beings become dependent on the uncertain swings of capitalist markets. Whereas most social theorists, however, focus on political solutions to social precarization in terms of political organizing or reform, Houellebecq focuses on the more intimate level of individuals and their immediate communities.

I start my reading of *Possibilité d'une île* from established phenomenological criticisms of post-Fordist capitalism. The latter highlight the emotional tonalities (*Stimmungen*) of opportunism, fear, and cynicism as central to post-Fordist being-in-the-world (De Carolis 1996; Virno 1996, 2003). All three are present in *le monde houellebecqien*, but the novelist adds a fourth, more fundamental emotional tonality (*Grundstimmung*): bitterness. Houellebecq's characters—much like precarious individuals in real life—become embittered with life, once their attempts at acquiring a secure social status inevitably fail. In Heideggerian terminology, Houellebecq's opportunistic, fearful, and cynical characters are unable to experience anxiety and confront their being-toward-death. According to Heidegger, the confrontation with death in anxiety empowers *Dasein* to authentically take hold of its own existence. Instead, the characters feel resentful that they have failed to acquire this control, while their bodies slowly decay. Biological rather than existential death determines the lifeworld of Houellebecq's characters. Finally, I argue that Houellebecq favours love as an emotional tonality that reinstalls structure in human existence. Rather than experiencing the wholeness of existence in death, Houellebecq's characters take responsibility for their lives through the loyal commitments they make to their loved ones. Here, the breakdown of communities of care is not only framed as a symptom of the social pathologies of late-capitalism, but also constitutes a hint at the cure. The main difference between the early *Possibilité d'une île* and the later *Anéantir* is that Houellebecq presents the possibility of redemption through love as a squandered chance in the former novel, while he is more optimistic about the capabilities of love in his later novel. What *Possibilité d'un île* suggests but refuses to demonstrate and *Anéantir* shows more explicitly, is that steadfast commitment to caring for our loved ones establishes an ethical response to post-Fordist precarization.

### Post-Fordism as a mode of being-in-the-world

According to Paolo Virno, post-Fordism is not just a mode of capitalist production but also a mode of being-in-the-world (Virno 1996, 13). From a phenomenological perspective, post-Fordist capitalism necessitates subjects with a particular attitude to their lifeworld. As a mode of production, post-Fordism promises economic wealth through the expansion of immaterial labour and mass individualist consumption. The economy is focused on the production of immaterial goods, like data, knowledge, and communication, while work arrangements become more flexible and less hierarchical.<sup>5</sup> Immaterial workers are expected to entrepreneurially embrace risk and insecurity in exchange for the opportunity to deploy their personal virtuosity in their work (Virno 2003, 52). Post-Fordism requires a particular kind of subject to make this economy work: she has to be creative and communicative to engage in immaterial labour, entrepreneurial and competitive to

take market initiatives and risks, individualistic and hedonistic to willingly consume the products created through immaterial labour. These are the individuals that populate the background of Daniel's world in *Possibilité d'une île*. Both Daniel and Isabelle are quintessentially immaterial workers that strategically influence the affective states of their audiences for profit. As editor of *Lolitas*, Isabelle says her target audience is 'une humanité factice, frivole, qui ne sera plus jamais accessible au sérieux ni à l'humour, qui vivra jusqu'à sa mort dans une quête de plus en plus désespérée du fun et du sexe; une génération de kids définitifs' (Houellebecq 2005, 37). Her readers want to stay hip and desirable by following youth trends. They derive their identities not from social traditions, but from symbolic products that signal their consumer identities. The trends advertised in her magazine are not pursued for their use-value but their sign-value (Baudrillard 2019, 106). They signal a status of youth and social desirability.

Daniel often criticizes the marketization of sexuality and identity as a symptom of generalized social precarity (Houellebecq 2005, 420–21). He believes people derive their self-worth increasingly from their sexual market value. They possess a certain quantum of 'valeur érotique' based on their physical attractiveness and individual charisma (Houellebecq 2005, 219). Partnerships subsequently result from rational cost/benefit-calculations. When individuals meet, they estimate the potential revenues in terms of pleasure and pain, and strike an agreement when the balance is positive. However, when new promising mates appear, people quickly leave each other. Via his characters, Houellebecq thusly diagnoses a complete subsumption of human intimacy under the logic of exchange (Sweeney 2013, 43). This cultural shift comes at the cost of emotional and existential stability. The (sexual) market value of individuals continually fluctuates according to changing circumstances. Daniel, for example, considers himself a valuable partner on the market for relationships at the height of his career, but he realizes, to his own dismay, that after years of shunning the public stage his personal value has dropped significantly. There is hence no fixed security about one's value to others, once social relations have been subsumed under precarious market conditions. Virno and Massimo De Carolis describe this precarious marketized mode of being-in-the-world on the basis of three emotional tonalities: opportunism, fear, and cynicism (Virno 1996, 14).

*Opportunism.* The post-Fordist culture of self-realization favours the pluralistic expansion of individual free choice over conformity to fixed social norms. The decline of social customs fosters a moral vacuum to be filled by individuals' own idiosyncratic preferences concerning the good life. They pick and choose their pursuit of the good life under free market conditions. Rather than imposing a single version of the good life on everyone alike, the marketized society thus encourages the widening of a neutral range of potential futures for all individuals. The future no longer logically follows from general cultural norms established in the past but can be altered in the present according to individualist preferences. According to De Carolis,

freedom constitutes, in fact, in modern society, the ultimate ethical value. Once it is translated into practical power or possibility, no criterion for measuring the success of an action can exist but the accumulation of ever greater potential. In other words, access to the possible aims at nothing but opening up new possibilities ad infinitum. [...] The world becomes no more than a supermarket of opportunities empty of all inherent value. (De Carolis 1996, 40–41)

Though this looks like a cornucopia of opportunity, the value of any of these possibilities becomes increasingly precarious (Christiaens 2021, 171–72). Under full market subsumption, value lies in the eye of the beholder. It depends on the actions of others beyond one's control. If the value of goods depends on market fluctuations rather than any inherent use value, there is no action that can be considered valuable in itself. Human relations are expected to support self-realization, but one cannot predict in advance which contacts will prove helpful. The only viable strategy is consequently to keep expanding one's personal network hoping that some of one's contacts will someday become advantageous.

The safest option is to keep one's options open as long as possible. 'The opportunist confronts a flux of interchangeable possibilities, keeping open as many as possible, turning to the closest and swerving unpredictably from one to the other' (Virno 1996, 16). One estimates the potential risks and revenues of any action to increase the quantum of beneficial opportunities. This entails rejecting any strong convictions, inflexible morals, or long-term social commitments that might hinder one's adaptability (De Carolis 1996, 46–47; Lasch 2018, 45). The post-Fordist personality prefers superficial networking and loose ethical commitments. One keeps in touch with everyone and all perspectives without definitively committing to any of them. One continuously reinvents oneself to adapt to changing market conditions (Ehrenberg 1994, 229; Gentili 2021, 152). This attitude, however, comes at the cost of long-term relationships that deepen human social bonds. As Houellebecq writes, 'ce n'est pas la lassitude qui fait fin à l'amour, ou plutôt cette lassitude naît de l'impatience, de l'impatience des corps qui se savent condamnés et qui voudraient vivre, qui voudraient, dans le laps de temps qui leur est imparti, ne laisser passer aucune chance, ne laisser échapper aucune possibilité' (Houellebecq 2005, 306).

Houellebecq describes Esther and her generation as a society of opportunists (Houellebecq 2005, 192–93). She allegedly values her personal independence above all else and foregoes long-term exclusive relationships to retain her personal freedom. Moreover, she maximizes her potential for personal pleasure by sleeping with multiple men. From her point of view, sexual relationships are conduits for the acquisition of sexual satisfaction, not expressions of a deeper, intimate bond to another human being. Thanks to her physical beauty, she belongs to an erotic quasi-aristocracy that bathes in such opportunities for sexual transactions (Houellebecq 2005, 218). Access to possible opportunities is, in other words, highly stratified with some individuals finding sexual ventures everywhere they go, whereas others—due to ugliness or social ineptitude—get nothing. Eventually Esther leaves all her friends and lovers in Spain behind in a heartbeat to pursue a music career in the United States. 'A aucun moment de leur vie, ils [i.e., Esther and her peers] ne connaîtraient l'amour. Ils étaient libres' (Houellebecq 2005, 342).

*Fear.* De Carolis introduces the second emotional tonality of post-Fordism by recalling Heidegger's distinction between fear and anxiety. The latter emerges from an unhomely mode of being-in-the-world. *Dasein* loses touch with innerworldly beings and thereby defamiliarizes itself with the world. As a result, it is confronted with nothingness, which generates anxiety. According to De Carolis, 'the entire world suddenly seems deprived of sense, wrapped in a veil that forbids our access. Anxiety confines the subject to a metaphysical elsewhere, rendering him or her extraneous, indifferent even to the concrete dangers that arise within the world' (De Carolis 1996, 43). Fear, on the other hand, concerns specific innerworldly beings of which the presence is experienced as

threatening to *Dasein*. One feels vulnerably exposed to the world, rather than cut loose from it. One *wants* to belong to the world, but the latter appears unwelcoming and unpredictable. One is *consigned* to a world inimical to *Dasein*.

Specifically post-Fordist fear emerges from the experience of market precarity. One's position in not just the labour market, but also the markets for social contacts and sexuality are constitutively insecure, which leads to a fear of being left behind, a fear of no longer receiving the respect from others for one's social status (Virno 1996, 17). Constant market competition sorts out winners from losers, so even the successful can never rest assured. In *le monde houellebecqien*, the threat of expulsion is often illustrated with the advent of old age (Houellebecq 2005, 213). Houellebecq regularly describes how the bodies of those who are no longer economically productive or sexually desirable are cast aside and neglected to the point of suicide (Houellebecq 2005, 92). In the background of the story, newswatches sometimes appear of the elderly dying in underfunded nursing homes due to lack of care (Houellebecq 2005, 351). *Anéantir* might be the first novel where Houellebecq makes the maltreatment of the elderly a central theme, but it is a recurrent motif in much of Houellebecq's writing (Betty 2019, 33). The elderly's mere existence is deemed damaging not only to the national economy, but also to the libidinal economies of their relatives. Neither the government nor family members stand to gain from caring for the elderly, so the latter are left to die in dysfunctional homes. Their sustenance is simply not worth the investment. The prospect of old age is hence rightfully encountered with fear in the Houellebecqian universe.

In *Possibilité d'une île*, the character to experience this fear most intensely is Isabelle. As she ages, her physical beauty fades, which Houellebecq describes in excruciating detail. Houellebecq derives a perverse sense of *jouissance* from describing the decline of female beauty.<sup>6</sup> Isabelle embodies the decaying corpse in its early stages, while it is still officially considered alive. She becomes lonely and depressed as she fails to keep up both professionally and sexually (Betty 2016, 53). She has to quit her job at *Lolitas* and abandons Daniel, after which he pursues a younger, more dynamic woman. Her life used to be flexible and well-adapted to the high-stakes competition of post-Fordist society, but the ageing process has corrupted her individual market value. Houellebecq menacingly compares her to a sick animal that voluntarily cuts itself off from the herd to die: 'Je connaissais le regard qu'elle avait ensuite: c'était celui, humble et triste, de l'animal malade, qui s'écarte de quelques pas de la meute, qui pose sa tête sur ses pattes et qui soupire doucement, parce qu'il se sent atteint et qu'il sait qu'il n'aura, de la part de ses congénères, à attendre aucune pitié' (Houellebecq 2005, 55).

*Cynicism*. Oscillating between the opportunist pursuit of pleasure and the fear of falling is tiring. Many succumb to burnout and depression (Ehrenberg 1994, 253; Berardi Bifo 2011, 138). The most effective weapon against exhaustion, according to Virno, is cynical detachment (Virno 1996, 17–18). People give up on all attempts at social and political change and merely fend for themselves. They accept their total integration into the market for social relationships, but distance themselves from its disappointments with ironic reserve, knowing fully well that there is nothing they can do about the general predicament of society. One either adapts to or withdraws from entirely marketized society. In his comedy shows, Daniel chooses to cynically adapt to the system. He writes the jokes he knows will generate laughs, even if he does not personally agree with them. 'J'avais été un peu une pute quand même, je m'étais adapté aux goûts du public' (Houellebecq 2005, 211). Comedy is, for Daniel, a purely formal exercise of



creating laughs by all means necessary. He simply does not care which social group he has to offend to get media attention. He also accepts positive journalistic reviews of his work when he knows they have entirely misunderstood his work or ascribe to him moral attitudes he does not possess. Vincent, on the other hand, a struggling artist Daniel meets and who later becomes the leader of the Elohimite cult, withdraws from social life to avoid disillusionment. He finds the real world utterly disappointing and rather than trying to change it, he shuts himself off from the world with soothing works of kitsch in his grandparents' old house. In his younger years, Vincent had, in fact, been a revolutionary artist. He built a socially engaged art installation in a prestigious art gallery in New York, called 'FEED THE PEOPLE. ORGANIZE THEM'. (Houellebecq 2005, 157). However, he got disappointed with the actual political impact. People were perfectly happy to visit the gallery, quietly contemplate his work, and drive home passing the homeless people whose fate did not touch them. Since then, Vincent chose to avoid the disingenuous world of art and withdraw to his small bungalow where he could create authentic art no one would actually see.

### **Bitterness as foundational emotional tonality of post-Fordism**

Though philosopher-critics of post-Fordism emphasize opportunism, fear, and cynicism in everyday life, Houellebecq adds a fourth, even more fundamental emotional tonality: bitterness (Houellebecq 1998, 7, 2010, 157). This bitterness is the spiteful product of the ageing process (Diken 2007, 59; Morrey 2013, 25; Boysen 2016, 485). The youth can opportunistically indulge their desires, but once the first signs of bodily decay appear, the tone dramatically shifts. While individuals frantically pursue narcissistic pleasure, the clock is ticking on their fragile biological bodies (Morrey 2013, 17). Their being-in-the-world is surreptitiously rendered even more precarious by a body that revolts against the aspirations of the will. In old age, one becomes increasingly embittered with one's bodily finitude. Biological entropy puts an expiration date on opportunities for individualistic enjoyment. With age one loses opportunities for self-realization and becomes entirely dependent on others (Lasch 2018, 41; Rosa 2020, 80). The latter's goodwill determines whether one can continue to lead a satisfactory life or whether one is locked up in a nursing home drearily awaiting one's final breath. One is gradually reduced to nothing but a burden to others' desire for self-realization.

To capture the full phenomenological significance of bitterness in Houellebecq, I return to De Carolis' discussion of fear and anxiety in Heidegger. The post-Fordist subject wants to belong in a world of competitive marketization, yet he feels vulnerably exposed to its insecurity. He virulently pursues pleasure and status because he fears being left behind. According to De Carolis, this mode of being-in-the-world is structurally impervious to experiencing anxiety (De Carolis 1996, 43). The latter entails defamiliarization with inner-worldly beings and a confrontation with nothingness. Fearful and cynical opportunists, on the other hand, need to pay careful attention to the world of market conditions to survive. A fashion mistake, a wrong sexual partner, or an unwise career decision could permanently wreck one's social standing. People need what neoliberals call 'entrepreneurial alertness' rather than anxious detachment (Kirzner 1993, 39).

The primacy of fear over anxiety signals a crucial shift in the Heideggerian ontology of *Dasein*. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger argues that the wholeness of the being of *Dasein* is a temporal experience (Heidegger 2010, 215). It is grounded in the confrontation with

death in anxiety. According to Heidegger, every subject that exists in the world, has a certain potentiality-of-being (*Seinkönnen*) that is yet unrealized (Heidegger 2010, 219). The being of *Dasein* is thus constitutively unfinished as long as it exists in the world. It always has possibilities standing out for it in the future. Its identity is not a settled matter (Hoffman 1993, 223). The post-Fordist opportunist relishes this potentiality-of-being, but even non-opportunists experience a multitude of open potential futures. The question then arises how *Dasein* can experience its being as a single consistent whole. What makes existence more than a fleeting sequence of disconnected moments with each their own potential futures? Heidegger answers that, in relating to one's death, one relates to an ultimate potentiality that delimits all other potentialities. Once dead, all potentialities cease and the window of opportunities is closed for good. Death delimits the range of *Seinkönnen* for *Dasein* as a constitutively finite being.

Heidegger distinguishes this ontological notion of death from the biological process of perishing (*verenden*) and the psychological process of coping with one's biological demise (*ableben*) (Heidegger 2010, 229). Neither affect *Dasein's* being-in-the-world itself. Biological perishing relates to the body as a present-at-hand inert being rather than to *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. Psychological demise, on the other hand, refers to the states of mind particular individuals contingently experience when they come to learn of their own biological mortality. Some panic, others are in denial, etc. These contingent personal responses explain nothing about death itself as the ultimate horizon of *Dasein's* potential. Relating ontologically to death means becoming aware of the limits of one's potential and thereby the necessity to authentically take ownership over one's choices in life. Being-towards-death in this ontological sense plays a pivotal role in Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein*. Heidegger describes anxiety as a confrontation with death, from which a call (*Ruf*) emerges to authentically appropriate one's own being-in-the-world. 'Death does not just "belong" in an undifferentiated way to one's own *Dasein*, but it lays claim on it as something individual. The nonrelational character of death understood in anticipation individualizes *Dasein* down to itself. This individualizing is a way in which the "there" is disclosed for existence' (Heidegger 2010, 243).

People usually evade awareness of death in their everyday lives, when they are intensively involved in worldly activities (Heidegger 2010, 235). One might abstractly know that 'everyone dies', but one fails to relate this knowledge to oneself (Heidegger 2010, 234). The defamiliarization from innerworldly beings experienced in anxiety cuts *Dasein* off from these distractions. It confronts *Dasein* directly with the finitude of its own potential and the necessity to appropriate this potential as irretrievably one's own. When *Dasein* contemplates death from the first-person perspective, its existence appears as irreplaceably its own. No one but *Dasein* itself can conduct its own existence. And since the possibilities are not endless, *Dasein* must actively choose how to live. 'Death is a possibility of being that *Dasein* always has to take upon itself. With death, *Dasein* stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being' (Heidegger 2010, 232). *Dasein* must take responsibility for its existence as always already its own and for which no one else can be held responsible. This realization generates, according to Heidegger, the freedom to conduct one's existence as an authentic self rather than a passive agent of the they (*das Man*) (Heidegger 2010, 245). The call to appropriate existence as one's own grants temporal consistency to existence (Hoffman 1993, 233). One might have been thrown (*geworfen*) into the conditions of one's existence beyond one's own choosing. The past weighs on the present. But in this present, *Dasein* experiences a potential to determine its own future and

master its own *Seinkönnen*. This potential matters, since the future is not endless. Death puts a limit to *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. *Dasein* is forced to project (*entwerfen*) its future within the limiting horizon of death. By appropriating one's existence in the present, one subjects the future to a determinate and authentic projection (*Entwurf*). Past, present, and future thereby come together in a linear whole consistent enough to constitute a biographical unit.

If post-Fordism, then, renders the experience of anxiety inaccessible to *Dasein*, it implies a disarticulation of lived temporality. Without a confrontation with death, the wholeness of existence is never apparent. *Dasein* does not encounter the task to take responsibility for its existence or project its future. Post-Fordist lived temporality is rather discontinuous and fractured (Berardi Bifo 2015, 138). Life becomes a sequence of disconnected moments with each its arbitrary selection of future opportunities. Subjects move from one moment to the next without these moments ever constituting a consistent whole. Since life is subsumed under the vagaries of unstable market conditions, subjects can only opportunistically try to expand the range of their *Seinkönnen* by pursuing beneficial opportunities. However, demanding these subjects to conduct their existence according to a coherent *Entwurf* is meaningless. How should one expect a life-plan from individuals who frantically switch homes, jobs, and partners in search of precarious self-realization?

Houellebecq argues that, despite this temporal unpredictability, one certainty remains: the body ages and decays until it inevitably dies. In a poem (Houellebecq 2005, 397), Daniel writes,

Nos corps sont estropiés  
 Mais nos chairs sont avides.  
 Disparues les promesses  
 D'un corps adolescent,  
 Nous entrons en vieillesse  
 Où rien ne nous attend.

The experience of death regresses into its biological and psychological variants that Heidegger had dismissed. The consciousness of death subsequently does not empower Houellebecqian subjects to take hold of their existence and subject it to a particular projection. It rather deflates their agency. According to Daniel, the elderly have even lost the right to rebel against their socially imposed redundancy. They are just condemned to being caged in 'des mouiroirs ignobles où ils étaient humiliés et maltraités par des aides-soignantes décérébrés' (Houellebecq 2005, 216). The Houellebecqian consciousness of death imposes fatalistic knowledge that however one tries to hold on to youth and vitality, the body is slowly approaching its final putrefaction. One can construct the most elaborate individual and collective life-plans, still every moment brings us closer to our inevitable biological disintegration. In the Houellebecqian universe, the universal prospect is a nursing home, where one awaits one's death, 'croupissant anonymement dans son urine, encore heureux s'il pouvait éviter d'être molesté par les aides-soignantes' (Houellebecq 2005, 198). This despairing predicament is the compost for bitterness: the sequence of life has lost all consistency, people have lost control over their existence, and simultaneously the youth are having fun while their bodies decay. 'Tel était le vrai sens de la solidarité entre générations: il consistait en un pur et simple holocauste de chaque génération au profit de celle appelée à la remplacer, holocauste cruel, prolongé, et qui ne s'accompagnait d'aucune consolation, aucun réconfort, aucune compensation matérielle ni affective' (Houellebecq 2005, 394).

## Houellebecq's ethics of deprecarization

Is there an escape from this bitter struggle for life? Can this ontological horror of post-Fordist being-in-the-world be averted? In *Possibilité d'une île*, Houellebecq experiments with the idea of a posthuman future made possible by genetic enhancement technology, but he forcefully rejects it (Betty 2012, 112; Morrey 2013, 138; Sweeney 2013, 152). The former Elohimate cult has created a new race of neo-humans through genetic re-engineering of human DNA. While this techno-fix diminishes the suffering that comes from biological finitude and the marketized competition for social status, it does not resolve the existential crisis Houellebecq describes. The testimonies of Daniel 24 or 25 do not show any signs of redemptive bliss. The neo-humans have rather sunk into a state of apathetic boredom (Houellebecq 2005, 440). The techno-fix not only eliminates feelings of pain and cruelty, but also of joy and compassion. The cloned Daniels experience nothing but indifference to their surroundings. Eventually, Daniel 25 chooses to abandon his compound and explore the world with Fox in search of others. He chooses mortality and pain just to feel something. 'Nous vivons comme entourés d'un voile, un rempart de données, mais nous avons aucun choix de déchirer le voile, de briser le rempart; nos corps encore humains sont tout prêts à revivre' (Houellebecq 2005, 391).

The hoped-for 'island', mentioned in the novel's title, refers to a poem Daniel wrote to Esther in a desperate attempt to win her back. It ends as follows (Houellebecq 2005, 433):

Entré en dépendance entière,  
Je sais le tremblement de l'être  
L'hésitation à disparaître,  
Le soleil qui frappe en lisière

Et l'amour, où tout est facile,  
Où tout est donné dans l'instant;  
Il existe au milieu du temps  
La possibilité d'une île.

The possibility of an island that Houellebecq tries to fathom is an island of love that provides solace and security amidst a sea of uncertainty and unhappiness (Skrzeszewski 2022, 44). The Houellebecqian notion of love provides a surprising alternative response to the problem of the wholeness of existence in Heideggerian ontology. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* experiences its existence as a temporal whole for which it can take responsibility through the confrontation with death. Death delimits the range of *Dasein's* potential, making one's choices matter in light of ontological finitude. Houellebecq, on the other hand, presents love as the factor responsible for the wholeness of existence (Sweeney 2013, 164). When Daniel meets Isabelle for the first time, he says, for instance, that he is sure they will have 'une histoire ensemble' (Houellebecq 2005, 32). Daniel's existence acquires temporal consistency thanks to a committed, long-term relationship with another person. His life-choices matter and his possibilities in life are limited through his loyalty to another person. Rather than opportunistically pursuing self-realization, Daniel and Isabelle make personal sacrifices to make their relationship work. Their relationship appears as the antipode of post-Fordist precarity, even if only for a short moment. Though the encounter between Daniel and Isabelle was contingent, a matter of being thrown into the world together, their choice to commit to each other gives consistency to the *Entwurf* of their common existence. Sharing

life together means voluntarily abdicating some possibilities for personal pleasure and opportunity in order to sustain life together. Daniel eventually fails this commitment, but that does not discredit the *possibility* of this island of happiness. A committed and loving relationship was possible for Daniel and Isabelle, yet they failed to enact that possibility. Only when Daniel has lost his loved ones, the possibility fades, his existence crumbles, he becomes embittered and eventually commits suicide. As Daniel states, it takes love for another being to have enough will-power to also love oneself enough to keep oneself alive. 'A quoi bon maintenir en état de marche un corps qui n'est pas touché par personne?' (Houellebecq 2005, 222). One subjects one's existence to a determinate projection primarily in service of a community of love one wishes to support.

A similar interpretation applies to Daniel 25. Once he has left the compound, Daniel 25 sees Fox finding joy in his revived hunting instincts. Throughout their journey, neo-human and dog get closer together (Sweeney 2013, 180). When Fox is killed by human tribespeople, Daniel is heartbroken (Houellebecq 2005, 467). But he also learns that this suffering comes from a good place. It is the other side of the coin of the bond he had with his companion. Fox' death hurts because their relation meant something to Daniel 25. 'Je savais maintenant avec certitude que j'avais connu l'amour, puisque je connaissais la souffrance' (Houellebecq 2005, 468). After this tragic experience, Daniel 25 can die thinking that 'la vie était réelle' (Houellebecq 2005, 485). Commitment to his fellow-traveller meant that Daniel 25 made himself vulnerable to the pain of loss, but also that he opened himself up to the experience of profound connection to another living being. Despite the bleak tone of the final pages of *Possibilité d'une île*, the story of Daniel 25's quest can thus be read as a concluding affirmation of life despite its many hardships.

Throughout the novel, the different Daniels often emphasize the role of love in the sustenance of human happiness (Morrey 2013, 145; Sweeney 2013, 158; Van Wesemael 2020, 59; Skrzyszewski 2022, 45). 'Je parle de l'amour partagé, le seul qui vaille, le seul qui puisse effectivement nous conduire à un ordre de perceptions différent, où l'individualité se fissure, où les conditions du monde apparaissent modifiées, et sa continuation légitime' (Houellebecq 2005, 174). While opportunists surf the uncertain waves of possibility, love requires the voluntary and vulnerable submission to another being. It requires the kind of long-term commitment antithetical to fluctuating markets for social relationships. 'Il n'y a pas d'amour dans la liberté individuelle, dans l'indépendance, c'est tout simplement un mensonge, et l'un des plus grossiers qui se peut concevoir; il n'y a d'amour que dans le désir d'anéantissement, de fusion, de disparition individuelle, dans une sorte comme on disait autrefois de sentiment océanique' (Houellebecq 2005, 421). One must willingly restrict one's options and expose one's weaknesses to the other, even if that implies the risk of being taken advantage of (Houellebecq 2005, 188). Love thereby constitutes the mirror image of post-Fordist fear: while the latter induces subjects to resent their vulnerability and cultivate adaptability to avoid being left behind, love entails a happy exposure to an unpredictable other because one holds faith in their goodness. One accepts vulnerability because one trusts and is committed to the people to whom one is vulnerable. One commits to the other for the long haul despite the decrease in short-term adaptability this choice implies. Love renders life less precarious insofar as it decommodified the value of beings. One's personal worth is no longer determined by fluctuating market demand—haunted by a bitter tendential fall in the rate of one's desirability to others—but is the object of deep and intimate bonds with one's fellow creatures. One

does not have to continually stage one's marketability to merit others' attention. Love rather connects people despite their flaws, limitations, and progressing age. It tends to not decrease but increase people's value to each other over time.

Love thereby forms the basis for communities of care in which individuals surrender to a beneficent whole greater than themselves and their own petty desires. Love entails a steadfast commitment that contradicts direct private interest, but elevates the self to a higher unity where genuine happiness resides. Contrary to the promise of consumerist capitalism, which locates happiness in the fulfilment of private desire, Houellebecq suggests happiness can be found in a transcending of private desire in a community of love. Though the human attempts at being loved are often painful and tragic—Daniel's rejection by Esther attests to this issue—the experience is nonetheless 'real'. Vulnerable exposure to the other entails the risk of rejection, but it also entails the chance at the gift of joy.

This potential of love to foster intimate connection among lost souls is where Houellebecq's approach changes most profoundly over the years. In *Possibilité d'une île*—and most of his other novels—Houellebecq presents love as a mere theoretical possibility that is irremediably lost to his protagonists (Skrzeszewski 2022, 39). They repeatedly fail to hold on to loving communities of care. The possibility of love is presented through brief moments of happiness, but nothing beyond this ephemeral possibility ever materializes. In *Possibilité d'une île*, the different Daniels experience love with an older woman who ultimately leaves Daniel, a younger woman who rejects his advances, and a dog that is ultimately killed. Houellebecq does not contemplate an actual island of love but its imagined possibility. In *Anéantir*, on the other hand, love becomes an actual island of happiness. That novel starts with a painfully detailed description of the frigid relationship of the Houellebecq-like protagonist Paul Raison and his wife Prudence. Though both have steady jobs and sufficient financial income, 'une amélioration des conditions de vie va souvent de pair avec une détérioration des raisons de vivre, et en particulier de vivre ensemble' (Houellebecq 2022, 35). The couple is subsequently hit by a series of tragic family events: Paul's father suffers a stroke, his brother Aurélien commits suicide, and Paul himself is diagnosed with terminal cancer. However, these trepidations no longer end the relationship—as they would have done in previous novels—but rekindle it. Paul and Prudence stay loyal to their common bond, which strengthens over time. Houellebecq describes their relationship as 'une île déserte au milieu du néant' (Houellebecq 2022, 593). This time, it is not just the possibility of an island of happiness amidst a sea of despair that interests Houellebecq; he locates its actual position on the map. When, by the end of the novel, Paul is diagnosed with cancer and refuses treatment, he does not bathe in bitterness over his biological decay or the loss of opportunities for egotistic self-realization. Though Paul still criticizes the rest of society for its narcissistic opportunism and disavowal of death, he is happy in the reassurance that he will not pass through the valley of death alone (Houellebecq 2022, 688). Paul's oncologist formulates Houellebecq's final message poignantly:

Vieillir seul, ce n'est déjà pas drôle; mais mourir seul, c'est pire que tout. [. . .] Il y a les gens qui sont aimés jusqu'à leurs derniers jours, ceux qui ont eu un mariage heureux par exemple. C'est loin d'être le cas général, croyez-moi. Dans ce cas, je trouve que le pompe à morphine fait double emploi, l'amour est suffisant (Houellebecq 2022, 723–24).

## Conclusion

Some argue that Houellebecq's turn to topics like elderly care and romantic love within the nuclear family showcase his intellectual development from an anti-capitalist rebel to a petty bourgeois ideologue subdued by the ruling order. By investigating Houellebecq's critique of social precarity in post-Fordist capitalism in his earlier novel *Possibilité d'une île*, I have argued that, to the contrary, Houellebecq's concern for old age and intimate love have been part of his critique of capitalism in earlier novels. The shifting tone in *Anéantir* hence does not attest to Houellebecq's growing bourgeoisification, but formulates more explicitly the ethics of deprecarization that often stays in the background of his other works. *Possibilité d'une île* highlights the opportunism, fear, cynicism, and bitterness that contemporary capitalism fosters. By rendering human lives precarious on their successful subsumption under free market competition, people lose the ability to form long-lasting meaningful relations. Ultimately, their personal value depends on their physical and social desirability, which diminishes with age and bodily decay. Post-Fordist opportunists hop from one opportunity to the next without ever attaining a secure social position. The only certainty they have is that their bodies age, become less attractive and worthy of others' investments, until they eventually decompose. The post-Fordist subject is haunted by the nightmare of saggy flesh and the putrefied corpse it is slowly turning into. Lived temporality is, in *le monde houellebecqien*, fundamentally disarticulated. Subjects fail to take control over their existence, while they additionally fail to come to terms with their own mortality.

The solution Houellebecq's *Possibilité d'une île* suggests is more sentimental than many of Houellebecq's fans and critics would have expected. He regularly highlights the power of love to grant consistency and meaning to human existence. One comes to terms with one's own existential possibilities and their limits by committing to another living being. This renders the subject vulnerable to rejection, but also generates the potential for experiencing a form of joy beyond the fulfilment of narcissistic desire. In *Anéantir* Houellebecq doubles down on this ethics of love. Rather than presenting it merely as a lost chance at redemption irremediably unattainable for the standard Houellebecqian character, the novelist depicts a love-story of an estranged couple that actually succeeds at cultivating a loving relationship. They thereby overcome the emotional tonalities dominant under post-Fordist capitalism and find comfort in each other's companionship. While Houellebecq contemplated the possibility of an island of love in his 2005 novel, by 2022 he is describing its actual discovery.

## Notes

1. Though Houellebecq is well-known for his novels, his artistic activities stretch across different media, such as film, music, poetry, etc. What often unifies these different oeuvres is Houellebecq himself as an *écrivain médiatique*, a postured performance of his own characteristic personality expressed in these different works. For more on Houellebecq as an *écrivain médiatique*, see (Meizoz 2007, 2014, 2019; Harris 2017, 2020).
2. See, for example, (Maris 2014).
3. Examples of such interpretations of Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* are (Sweeney 2010, 2013; Willging 2020).

4. Though I will sometimes compare *Possibilité d'une île* to *Anéantir*, I do not intend to provide a full overview of the thematic development of anti-capitalism and love in Houellebecq's entire oeuvre. This would expand the research scope beyond what is feasible for a single article.
5. See (Lazzarato 1996; Hardt and Negri 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello 2011).
6. For an insightful discussion of the status of anti-feminism and misogyny in Houellebecq's work, see (Crowley 2002).

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## ORCID

Tim Christiaens  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8676-1980>

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