

# Living on the Surface of Life

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (May 2024)



Pandora –by John William Waterhouse, 1896

*Personally, I did not lack gods; the light, the night, the sea ... But these are gods of pleasure: they fulfill you, then they empty you. –Albert Camus*

Postmodern life has squashed the long-held understanding that mankind is divided between people who live merely skimming the surface of life, that is, on biological and sensual terms, a form of hedonism that seeks pleasure at all cost, and those who demand more of themselves, seeking to live in the interior, the bowels of life. The former embrace momentary, sensual bliss, or so they believe, through flippancy. The latter seize life-affirming, time-proven values and understanding of permanent things and are rewarded with contentment, and ultimately, joy.

Postmodern life brazenly celebrates the cult of the frivolous, chic relativism, and barbaric no 'narratives.' This releases self-indulgent, 'stop me if you can' demons from Pandora's Box that flaunt their altar to uninhibited, value-free emancipation.

Truth is active, not passive, rising to the surface of human life when solicited. One such truth is that life makes great demands on us that alert us to possibility and limitation. This truth sets up a time-tested paradox: The realm of possibility demands prudence, moderation, and self-discipline. This is the cost of embracing free will.

This paradox makes us realize that respect for limitation makes us free to engage with what is genuinely possible. This is a question of good will and intellectual honesty. Possibility tests our nature, temperament, and vocation against the backdrop of human life that is objective reality. Some people recognize this calling from an early age, embrace the challenge, and consequently are able to live well-

grounded, fulfilled lives. Others not only evade these demands, they shamelessly shun them, opting instead for the sensual and momentary inebriation that 'infinite' possibilities promise. The latter signals a failure to cultivate profundity, while clinging to the surface of life. This only intensifies the paradox.

Ignorance may be bliss, but only for superficial dunderheads who do not realize they make tons of trouble for themselves and others by embracing the surface of life. These are hollow, gutted men and women. There is not a small number of people today in private and public life that fondle the here-and-now with neurotic fervor; profundity is a threat to the manipulation of reality that unbridled emancipation pledges.

### Hierarchical and Lateral Values

The surface of life eviscerates all profundity. When life is lived superficially, ideas, beliefs, morality and values are encountered laterally, not hierarchically.

Lacking understanding of the hierarchy of values, the embrace of come-as-you-may values is the response that people who live on the surface of life have for human contingencies. Though, this perhaps gives too much credit to the adherents of superficial life. All forms of superficiality move laterally, for superficial, situational values shift like sand in a wind-driven shore, a hapless butterfly in the wind.

In other words, life lived on the surface is the natural way for superficial people to siphon the honey from the tree of pleasure; the gift that keeps on giving. Hedonism is a powerful elixir because it promises an endless array of worldly pleasure: messianism of the here-and-now.

Ironically, living on the surface of life gives the appearance of control. Clutching to base appearances is a staple

condition of this paradox. To live on the surface of life has an undeniable 'liberating' factor, for superficiality pretends to place profundity in a spatialized stranglehold that takes its cue from quantitative phenomena.

Furthermore, quality disrupts the modus operandi of the chic notion that life is best lived on the surface. Life lived on the surface anxiously and hopelessly awaits the next crisis, and its management, by embracing the situational allure of appearances that pose as reality.

## The Aesthetic and Moral Casualties of Life Lived on the Surface

Living on the surface of life fails to penetrate into any mystery or profundity that point to the sublime, given that the values that inform well-grounded human existence are not amenable to a lateral approach.

The surface of life, as experienced by people in postmodernity robs us of the ability to cultivate profundity. Postmodernity has placed a moratorium on profundity, opting instead for the spurious, frivolous, and banal. This leads to pretentious and affected values. Ideologically speaking, virtue signaling is a fine example of this.

Most importantly, the surface of life levels life to mere sensation, thus destroying our capacity to even suspect the need for profundity. How many ways are there to do violence to the human person?

The surface of life, which never advances beyond the biological, takes precedence and commandeers all aspects of postmodern life: political, religious, intellectual, romantic, even destroying our sense and sensibility for life itself. This results in adhering to corrosive dysfunctionality that is brandished shamelessly.

## A Higher Calling to Counter Auguste Comte's Positive Age

Why is cultivation of the existential/moral ground that serves to anchor life as reflective existence paradoxical? The paradox involves the confusion of appearance with reality. The ancient Greek word for appearance is *phainómenon*, literally, 'appearing to view.' The surface of life is infused with a barrage of sensual appearances, especially of sight and sound—never more abrasive and corrosive than in postmodernity.

Appearance serves as the entry-level realm of perception that must be internalized and appropriated by attentive people, if they are to advance from the level of vague perceptions to coherent conception.

Seeing through the surface of life, thoughtful people shun the monopoly that the sensual has on the imagination, what the philosophical materialist and founder of positivism, Auguste Comte, refers to as the final stage of development of human history: the 'positive' age.

The gods of sensuality fuel the engine of postmodern life, while gutting existential longing and destroying our capacity for apprehension of human reality. Lacking the ability to decipher appearance from reality, life that is lived on the surface of life fails to surpass equivocal quantitative phenomena that perception must contend with.

Postmodernity turns life into vacuous theater, human communication and affection into the sad spectacle of a paper moon; love is relegated to the column of sophomoric emotions. Alleging that life has no rhyme or reason, adherents of the surface of life turn man into what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a 'wasted passion.'

Life lived as a wasted passion opens itself up to untold moral/spiritual catastrophes that are rooted in man's

incapacity to experience happiness.

Selfishness, springing from the narcissistic refusal to cope with the demands of objectivity reality that alert us to the existence of other people, is the dominant passion in postmodernity.

C.S. Lewis refers to man in *The Abolition of Man* as gutted. T.S. Eliot's 'hollow men' and Lewis' description of post-humanity are some of the many effects of the positive age—the final stage of human life that the materialist Comte ascribes to history.

We can't have it both ways: an alleged scientific age that has raised an altar to bloated rationalism, and recognition of the essences that inform human life and reality, which elevate it from the merely biological and sensual.

The cultivation of self-reflection, if for no other reason than a practical response to life's contingencies, leads to genuine understanding and wisdom.

Consider what the Spanish thinker, Baltasar Gracián, says about the cultivation of a good life—and its opposite—the notion that ignorance is bliss, in *The Pocket Oracle and the Art of Prudence*: "Just as virtue is its own reward, so vice is its own punishment."

The demons of sensuality that postmodernity release from hellish Pandora's Box cling to the throat of people of good will, those who keep the moral score.

Demons protect their own.

[Table of Contents](#)

Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [\*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay\*](#), [\*Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man\*](#), [\*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy\*](#) and [\*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity\*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [\*Philosophy Today\*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [\*Philosophical Perspective on Cinema\*](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)