

# THE VIRUS OF THE QUESTION

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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*Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is a presentation of ordinary experience of the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. By illuminating fundamental moments of the said experience, this analysis attempts to uncover its deeper dynamics, here described by dint of the notion of questionableness, which—as it transpires—stands in some conflict with what can be observed at the level of ordinary ways of its articulations (shaped and spread by public opinion, which very much desires an answer). The experience of the

pandemic uncovers the existence of a certain conflict between its more superficial layer, characterizing a social-political dimension of human existence, and its deeper layer, which unfolds at the level of individual life. This conflict constitutes a manifestation of a few-century-long and evermore aggravated divergence of two sorts of experiences: the objectifying scientific-technical and the existential one.

*Keywords:* pandemic, COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, experience, questionableness.

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## **Virus vprašanja. Fenomenologija pandemije COVID-19**

### *Povzetek*

14 Namen pričujočega članka je predstavitev običajnega izkustva pandemije, ki jo je povzročil virus COVID-19. Z osvetlitvijo temeljnih potez tega izkustva skuša analiza razkriti njegovo globljo dinamiko, tukaj opisano s pomočjo pojma vprašljivosti, ki se do določene mere nahaja, kakor se izkaže, v nasprotju s tistim, kar je mogoče opaziti na ravni običajnih načinov njegovih artikulacij (oblikuje in razširja jih javno mnenje, kakršno zahteva odgovore). Izkustvo pandemije razkriva obstoj specifičnega konflikta med njegovo površinsko plastjo, ki zaznamuje socialno-politično razsežnost človeške eksistence, in njegovo globljo plastjo, kakršna se razgrinja na ravni posameznega življenja. Tovrsten konflikt konstituira manifestacijo nekaj stoletij dolge in vedno bolj zaostrene divergence med dvema vrstama izkustva: objektivirajočo znanstveno-tehnično in eksistencialno.

*Ključne besede:* pandemija, COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, izkustvo, vprašljivost.

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## Introduction

The ongoing pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus quickly mobilized a substantial potential of humans, who joined forces to alleviate the dangerous consequences of the transmission of microbes and to avert a global catastrophe. The role of managing this fight was assumed by national and supranational political forces, which almost immediately launched their most effective “weapons.” Since causes of the pandemic lie in nature, technology-driven natural and medical sciences try to counter the pandemic. The point is to possibly shortly and adequately diagnose the situation, which would enable, on the one hand, immediately taking up measures minimizing any further transmission of the pathogen; and, on the other hand, discovering in the nearest future a proper remedy as well as inventing an effective vaccine. Simultaneously, also other technology-supported sciences (e.g., economics and the humanities) engaged in fighting the pandemic, in order to smoothly go through the forthcoming economic crisis or to efficiently deal with the repercussions of social isolation. Generally speaking, employing a wide variety of sciences and technologies, one counts on an efficient moderation of the health-related, economic, social, political, and psychological consequences of the pandemic.

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And, thus—as briefly sketched—, the pandemic is experienced indirectly, that is, through media reports originating from the public sphere. Media coverages—engaging our consciousness from dusk till dawn, brimming with images and words—constitute a hitherto unknown act in the global spectacle. Firmly locked-down in their premises, the spectators experience it on the edge of their seats, being vexed by what they can see and meekly expecting an improvement of the situation. Can we say anything else about such experience of the pandemic? How does it look, specifically, apart from what media coverages show? What sort of internal existential drama is going on backstage, with the main stage being filled with white noise stemming from our TV screens, smartphones, and computers? What is happening here at all? What moments constitute the structure of this experience and how does it proceed? Is there any distinguishable leitmotif, which can define the whole?

The present paper constitutes an attempt at a phenomenological reflection on the pandemic caused by COVID-19 as considered from the perspective of

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the ordinary and primordial experience thereof. The paper is tantamount to a sort of philosophical documentation written at the “battlefield.” It alludes to recognized achievements of the phenomenological thought; yet, it does not specially favor any of the standpoints.<sup>1</sup> After the preliminary appreciation of what sort of experience we are dealing with here and what moments comprise it from the subjective as well as objective point of view (I), the attempt is made to unearth its deeper structures, reaching for one of the so-called fundamental experiences, which, as it turns out, stands in a clear conflict with the experience as shaped by the messages of the public opinion (II). We are especially interested in the *cognitive* aspect of this experience—about its uncertainty, which may be related to the fear of death, but not reducible to it. We omit, at this point, the question of how much all uncertainty is lined with the fear of death. We skirt the topic of emotions and feelings, which attend this kind of anxiety (e.g., hope, solidarity, gloom). We also only mention changes in the axiological and behavioral layers of the pandemic experience. Confronted with ordinary experience of sciences and of contemporary culture, which constitute sharp messages and for which the ultimate value is to *respond* quickly to what is happening, what stands out, is a dominant feature of this fundamental experience, which is its permanent questionableness (III).

### **I. Preliminary diagnosis**

The pandemic is a situation, in which through personal contacts contagious microbes are transmitted on a large scale causing a life-threatening disease and the mobilization of all the forces aimed at life-preserving. However, it is the protection of *one's own* existence that comes to the fore; or, specifically, the protection of one's health from being infected; due to the fact that other people carry the disease, the pandemic is of a thoroughly social nature. Furthermore, the collective nature of this experience applies not only to persons, but also to non-human animals, objects of everyday use, buildings, and to Nature. Although from the biological perspective the cause of the pandemic is a contagious disease, which is transmitted through infecting successive persons

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<sup>1</sup> References to specific solutions will be signaled by appropriate bibliographical hints.

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and related to individual organisms, the scale of the illness in a given area and at a given time makes up for the circumstance that the disease in question is not experienced as a state of the organism, but rather as a state of the surrounding. It is the environment that is “ill”: what is dangerous, is not only the direct contact with people, but also with physical objects, with which the former are in contact; or with air they breathe. Due to the idiosyncrasies of the transmission of the virus, which does not “reside” only on the surfaces of bodies or physical objects, but creates around them a pathogenetic aura, what comes into the limelight in our daily lives, is the existential experience of space, around which a modified approach to the entirety of our surroundings is woven. Space is subject to a reorganization, the principle of which is “keeping distance” and making discriminations. These are the key categories, with which we deal with the world during the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic performs a localizational function: it divides the space of life in such a manner that it gives rise to new physical and mental barriers and/or fixes the already existing physical and mental divisions. What is open in and by itself (space, surroundings, the world) during the plague, is getting more and more closed and divided. Openness and closeness, which are the two basic categories of our natural approach and which in our pre-pandemic life are experienced as constant and invisible motifs of its organization (not only of the spatial one; cf. Sobota 2019), during the epidemic get exposed and solidified, and their respective extensions are fixed anew. Given the disease, one can distinguish in our surroundings between what constitutes the place of our existence, the scope of which is measured by the needs and functions of our bodies (our houses or other places of isolation), and the external world. In case of a healthy person, due to their isolation, one’s home is considered a danger-free zone. It is in our houses that we have direct bodily contact with our “loved ones.” The criterion of closeness cannot be identified in this case with the degree of kinship, but it is—quite literally—a degree of spatial distance from our bodies: although some of our loved ones may be distant in terms of the relation by blood, the closest ones are the ones who at a given time literally live close to one another. Their distinctive feature is that they are experienced as potentially healthy, whereas the surroundings of our house are the place of residence for those with whom we remain in contact only “from a distance” and who are

18 experienced as being potentially ill. Thus, space is divided along the lines of the scope of sense experiences of our bodily receptors, with this scope determining the routes of transmission of the threat: a contact with the external world is confined to our senses, which by their nature work from a distance (vision and hearing) and which do not pose the threat of a direct contact. The other senses, the functioning of which requires a direct and close contact (smell, taste, and touch), function well only in their immediate surroundings. Certainly, this requires an intensified control over one's body and of its prior behaviors in the public sphere (such as touching objects, greeting by shaking hands, staying close to other people in small rooms, etc.). The persons inhabiting the said spaces are properly discriminated: only "home dwellers" are experienced fully in their bodiliness and in their aspects yielding themselves to sensory perception; "strangers," in turn, are experienced and localized only via senses working from a distance. Hence, whatever is normally open in the bodiliness to experience via senses operating from an immediate distance, now becomes assessed as potentially dangerous. As a result, what is normally constitutive of "being human" and is welcomed in its full disclosure, during the pandemic is identified with a place of potential transmission of the virus and is thus kept hidden. What is thereby meant, is the face and hands. Thus, the humanity inhering in strangers is somewhat phenomenologically modified and, in consequence, they are experienced first and foremost as potential carriers of the virus.

This introductory description of the phenomenological content of the experience of the pandemic already hints at some points, which—put together—constitute a whole and which should be subject to a deeper phenomenological scrutiny. What is at stake, here, are the phenomenology of body, phenomenology of the Other, phenomenology of space, and phenomenology of perception. Furthermore, due to a wide range of the gravity of changes, it is also other domains of phenomenology that can contribute some insights in this respect. The experience of the pandemic is the experience of a change of content and a reconfiguration of traditionally distinguished realms of life (*Lebenswelt*), such as *Selbstwelt*, *Mitwelt*, and *Umwelt*. For example, due to the fact that many work-related duties were shifted online, not only the experience of work changed, but also the experience of residence, work-time,

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and leisure, of moving as well as the one of intimacy, etc. The significance of technology additionally grew. It is the implementation of technology at home that enabled the contact with what first required an unconditional presence in the public sphere (participation in classes, medical check-ups, celebrating with a group of friends, etc.). Hence, across physical distinctions, there lies a safe haven—from the perspective of the threat of being infected with the virus—of virtual reality, which makes ordinary experience of space tricky and calls for express attention. Finally, the experience of the pandemic described herein is the experience of a healthy person who is at risk of being infected, but who is never actually infected. The situation starts to change radically when we consider the experience of the pandemic from the perspective of the person who either went through the disease or who is doing so now.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the ill person must remain totally isolated from others—because of which they experience not only physical, but also social isolation—, coupled with the fact that, as it happens among the persons infected, they lose the sense of smell and taste, as well as all sorts of anomalies taking place, make it the case that the whole experience of the world changes drastically. Under such circumstances, the experience of the pandemic is getting significantly complicated, which should exert a corrective influence also on our understanding of the meaning of the experience of the pandemic on the part of the person who has not actually fallen ill just yet. It has been long since noted that investigating various experiences of pathological nature contributes to a better understanding of the so-called normal experiences (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 100, 122–167; Carel 2016, ch. 9).

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The indicated elements of the experience of the pandemic do not contain the main motif, which focuses them on itself and redefines their functioning. The said motif is the most far-reaching—on the part of the object—point of the “intentional arc,”<sup>3</sup> along which the experience is extended. The natural science calls it “SARS-CoV-2 virus.” The main reason for anxiety and the permanent point of reference for our altered manner of functioning in

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<sup>2</sup> We leave aside the phenomenological research of the experience of the real illness. Cf. Carel 2016.

<sup>3</sup> This concept originates with Merleau-Ponty, who borrowed it from R. Fischer (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 155).

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our surroundings, the reorganization of which occurs mainly through considering the sensory capacities of our bodies, is, thus, something, which is relatively well established scientifically and which—taking into consideration its physical size—still evades the fine-grained resolution of human senses. In other words, although the illness is experienced in our daily lives in terms of the controlled bodily movement in a reorganized space and accordingly shifted horizons of what is perceptually available, its cause is directly and sensorily *unavailable*. Our extraordinary bodily behavior constitutes a reaction to a pathogenic factor transcending the capacities of our natural sensory perception. Although, as a matter of course, due to powerful microscopes we are able to see the virus, this possibility, reserved to just a few people, does not translate into a natural perception thereof. For the majority of us, an adjustment made to our behavior during the pandemic is a response to what is invisible. However, its sensory inaccessibility does not have the character of privation, but has a definitely positive sense. This non-sensory presence of the virus is merely relative in the eyes of scientists.

20 However, for the majority of us, this very feature of the existence of the virus is fundamental. It is this feature—as the most far-reaching “objective correlate”—that a certain experience refers to, with this experience lying at the foundation of the above-sketched ordinary experience of the potential disease and being experienced through a phenomenologically modified space, taking into consideration therein—quite differently from the “normal conditions”—distinguished permanent reference points (one’s own body, foreign body). After all, the phenomenological motive for the above-mentioned discriminations is not an experience of the pathogen, understood as a rationally identified, an under a microscope observable and objective pathogenic factor. Although the virus as such has recently become the most pressing issue, to which all the other issues are subordinated, due to its size, which transcends our natural perceptual capacities, and rather chaotic reports on its transmission, the virus is a sort of imperceptible center of (de) composition and (in)determinacy, from which an awe-inspiring mystery radiates. The virus might also be—with certain qualifications—compared to the transcendental X, which is the point of reference of all our pandemic experiences. Thus, it is no surprise that in prior, more religiously inclined

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eras, the state of the pandemic normally urged empirical-world-transcending, moral-eschatological interpretations. Nowadays, we know what actually causes the disease; however, this scientific knowledge does not translate into an ordinary sense of confidence or into rational behavior. Because the virus is not experienced at the level of our natural sensory perception, which constitutes our basic way of referring to external reality and finds it commonsensical modalities, its central place within our ordinary experience is not a well-recognized solid entity (such as, say, a comet passing by the Earth) or an event for that matter (such as, say, a natural catastrophe). Rather, the status of the virus is “something” invisible and imponderable, the workings of which extends in space and time. It is a certain process, the details of which are unpredictable and remain just an open question. What one is left with, is waiting for the consequences of the presence of the virus. This presence—as we noted—is not directly given, but, if it “manifests itself,” then it is only noticeable through bodily symptoms. Because the virus manifests itself via physical symptoms, about which—statistically speaking—we find out, not through personal experience, but rather through intermediary media coverages, its *presence* is of a strongly representative nature. Moreover, this is such a sort of presence that—although it manifests itself in the mode of human existence—it originates from beyond the human world. The virus “haunts” man, it comes from outside of the latter’s world and manifests itself therein as a “stranger” overpowering it. In this respect, it resembles something demonic. Something is happening, something is approaching... Still, we do not know what it is and what consequences it might ultimately bring. Its nature is destructive and yet not fully specified. The peculiar non-sensoriness (asensuality), mysterious and processual, the non-objective nature of the existence of the virus are emotionally experienced in the form of anxiety and fear, which, in turn, can be mixed-up with the hope that “somehow everything will work out.”

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## II. Conflict of experiences

Are the thus sketched experiences subsumable under any one uniform category? And as far as the foundations of the experience of the world altered

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by the pandemic go, does there exist a describable “fundamental experience,” which readjusts and organizes the entirety of our natural approach during the pandemic?

22 From the perspective of the world image, as created by the media, which is just a part of our ordinary experience, the fundamental and desirable way of referring to the fact of the spreading of the virus is provided by a rational-scientific approach. This tallies well with what for several centuries has been a growing tendency within this natural experience, which first and foremost, historically speaking, characterizes the European part of humankind. From a scientific standpoint, we are dealing with a pathogenic zoonotic virus of a given type, the functioning of which requires man to take some defensive measures. Designing, recommending, and implementing them is the responsibility of scientific institutions and state’s organizations as well as of the public media, the task of which is to “spread education.” Without a doubt, an effective protection from the virus may be provided only by science and technology. The “problem” is that this dominating role of science in the media messages constitutes just a part of our all-round everyday life experience, which in its prevailing content and in the way of experiencing it relates rather loosely to the former or even—as it is in the case under consideration—conflicts with it. For, in spite of being confident that only science and technology bolstering one another are able to overcome the threat, one feels fairly disoriented towards the two. How is that possible?

The fact that science was designated to be the main defender of humankind against the pandemic’s destruction derives from its several-century-long cultural domination. However, it is to be noted that, from a phenomenological point of view, the way of referring to the world, which a scientific approach involves, and the one we are forced to assume when faced with a threat of the virus share at least one important feature: they both require keeping some distance from the surroundings. However, the concept of distance, which we spoke of earlier in the context of the experience of space, has a broader meaning. What is thereby meant, is refraining from direct involvement in the current affairs and from daily striving for “bread-winning.” This peculiar withdrawal, which uncovers a normally invisible—and also hidden, namely under the content (*Gehalt*) of the world—fragment of the “intentional arc”

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(that is its “sense of reference”; *Bezugssinn*; cf. Heidegger 1995, 63), reconciles the experience of the pandemic with the scientific approach. Whereas in the experience of the pandemic, the richness of this sense is still stated in the question and thus preserved, in the scientific approach, the said sense of reference gets reduced to only one, that is to the “objective sense.” By eliminating all the remaining ways of reference, the scientific cognition treats the world and its constitutive elements purely objectively. Due to this fact, what is a sort of “mystery” (with all its shades) for the common experience, is—from the scientific point of view—a well-defined *problem*, which needs to be solved. That is why the attempt at reducing the sense of reference to the scientific approach and filtering the entirety of our experience through science is perceived in terms of a cognitive dissonance, which is, in turn, the stronger, the less efficient the “filter” itself is. That is why so much room is made for other types of cognition that do not fit the scientific-technical methodology. The fact that we picked up phenomenology to describe the experience of the pandemic stems from—among others—the circumstance that—similar to the pandemic experience and to scientific experience—phenomenology suggests running counter to the intentional stance—and, thus, suggests suspending the belief of “natural experience” (Husserl 1976, 61–66)—, yet, unlike scientific cognition, it does not reduce the entirety of the sense of reference to the objective sense; instead, it allows for the full manifestation of the rich content thereof. One would even like to say that due to one’s retreat from the world and due to suspending the intentional stance, the experience of the pandemic seems tailored to a phenomenological viewpoint.

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A phenomenological proposal becomes more attractive than scientific cognition of what happens in the realm of experience,<sup>4</sup> especially given the fact that the latter became skeptical towards what is experienced as “science.”<sup>5</sup> Although the official message has it that

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4 It is to be stressed that this “advantage” of phenomenology over scientific cognition holds only in the context of the description of the experience of the pandemic and not with regard to the ways of dealing with it.

5 The following remarks, pertinent to science, are not related to its objective content or its immanent, ideal order, but to the way, in which science is normally experienced during the pandemic.

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the only thing we are left with while facing the pandemic is to develop our scientific-technological potential—which many a time proved effective under similar circumstances—, the current experience of the pandemic demonstrated its partial helplessness. Any crisis is always a state of uncertainty, but the former becomes the more pronounced, the greater claims it makes for having indisputable knowledge on every single topic. Nowadays, with the several hundred years of scientific and technological progress, the common feeling that we as humankind know a lot about the world and, what is more, that this is the most reliable knowledge, the cognitive optimism, which oftentimes leads to epistemic fundamentalism, constitutes an important element of our contemporary natural experience.<sup>6</sup> From the point of view of the ordinary-instilled trust in the power of the scientific approach, the current pandemic brought about the feeling of disappointment. For it showed how little we know about even the simplest things from the scientific standpoint. Despite the quick diagnosis of what type of a virus we are dealing with, a few fundamental issues remain as yet days unknown. Ordinary consciousness feels disoriented when, facing spectacular and ambitious scientific and technological discoveries, which each day are being made at various corners of the world and which bolster our belief in techno-science's monopoly on truth, there are so many—oftentimes contradictory—answers to seemingly simple questions: what means are efficient for the protection from the COVID-19 virus? Does wearing a mask prevent an infection? Can people who had already been ill fall ill again? Why do younger people go through the disease in a milder manner? What is the incidence rate of the disease and what is its death toll? How long does the infection last and how long is an ill person infectious? Is the ultimate cause of death the virus or the declining health due to the development of a so-called concomitant disease? Although the last issue may seem, from the medical perspective, resolved, it is controversial at the level of, say, regulations related to health insurance. It seems that, given the belief in the omnipotence of scientific knowledge and of technology, these are the questions, which are not supposed to appear at all. But still...

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<sup>6</sup> The reverse side of the same phenomenon is epistemological skepticism, which calls into question all the truths, including the indubitable ones.

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The said lack of orientation towards the virus itself, which—as already mentioned—implies something imponderable, is merely the tip of the iceberg of ordinary feelings of uncertainty and the experience of ignorance revealed by the pandemic. The answers to such questions as: at which moment of the pandemic are we now? when (or if at all) will the world go back to normalcy? what sort of impact is the epidemic going to have on economy and society? shall we expect in the near future the recurrence of the disease?—point to divergent directions and are formulated without adequate confidence. At the same time, in ordinary consciousness, there remains the feeling that something is happening. There appears the question “what is it?”, however, none of the answers is able to fill the void of ignorance brought about by this peculiar experience. One poses the question: “What is happening?”; and waits in vain for an answer, which is not forthcoming. One experiences oneself how science, which once “broke the spell” of the world, now coupled with technology enchanted it yet again—this is the very world, from which one is now being wrenched. As a matter of course, the more, in ordinary consciousness, science in its role of combating the virus disappoints and the more room it makes for “subjective” interpretations of reality, the more poignant becomes the feeling that something serious is going on and that nobody knows how to behave and what to think when confronted with these premonitions. However, the fact that the experience of questionableness of the pandemic situation cannot be dismissed by media-covered opinions expressed by scientists or experts and politicians does not make the state of the question accepted as an integral and indispensable part of the experience of the pandemic. A question is not an uncertainty or a doubt, which one can hold on to forever. Any serious question implies the desire of finding an answer thereto. Otherwise, it would simply not be a question at all. That is why, if science—presenting itself in the public sphere as the only one that can provide true answers—fails to give an answer to “what is happening,” the desire giving rise to that very question does not disappear at all. Rather, there are other extra-scientific possibilities that are then taken into consideration.

This lack of adequate answers, which would slake the thirst for questioning is hard to bear for ordinary consciousness. The process of socialization and education inculcate in us, from our early childhood onwards, the belief

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that the European civilization is the proper home for knowledge, which—all in all—means the culture of answer. This superstition, well established over centuries, assumes that an answer is of utmost importance and that the moment of a question should be reduced to a bare minimum because it is only an introductory, provisional moment of acquiring knowledge, which in turn is supposed to be of the form of an integrated system of answers; or, actually, of theses. This attitude was first elaborated within European metaphysics and then became the universal assumption of all knowledge, especially scientific knowledge. The human being raised in this spirit learns that, granted, once people posed questions, to which they did not know answers and which led them to various types of “fantastic” interpretations. However, once the scientific method was discovered, there are much fewer unanswered questions; and the ones that still remain unanswered are either—as neo-positivists claimed—unanswerable (that is, meaningless) or still—due *only* to the state of science itself—ineliminable. Certainly, whereas in the eyes of scientists, the latter set includes not so few questions at all—the awareness of which provides one of the motivating reasons for inaugurating successive investigations—, the extra-scientific ordinary experience is characterized by the circumstance that it does not allow for the former sort of consciousness. The active trace of scientific cognition operating within the natural approach is not methodical questioning. The natural approach is a blend of various perspectives, the common feature of which is the fact that they avoid “remaining in the state of questionableness.” If there appears an experience, which urges us to pose questions—and this is indubitably so in the case of certain events, which are important to both the individual and the society, such as the state of an epidemic—, then almost at the very same moment they appear to be marginalized or eliminated, or redefined into so-called problems.<sup>7</sup>

And, thus, the experience of the pandemic appears, in which it transpires that, despite the enormous amount of cognitive resources having been accrued in our culture through the decades—and which are widely available due to the internet—, there are answers to the simplest of questions still missing.

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7 On the difference between question and problem cf. Gadamer 2004, 368–369.

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Strictly speaking, the point is not that there are no specific answers—quite the contrary, there are so many of them that one can get easily confused—, but that the common belief that there must exist such answers is now quite a stretch. What was violated, was the sense of fundamental certainty of this world, which to some degree is simply necessary for life and typically characterizes the common attitude of man towards his surroundings (Husserl 1939, §7). During the pandemic, this certainty is always distorted. However, the higher its degree at the outset, the more poignant the feeling of its weakening. Under the veil of certainty, there crops up a void of ignorance, with the latter not being attenuated by any provisional answers. One must remain in the state of questionableness.

But still, even under such extreme circumstances as the experience of an epidemic and the state of ignorance caused by it, ordinary consciousness comes up with various ways of abstaining from questioning. There are at least a few strategies of reacting to this alarming situation and a few fundamental models of responding to the said experience of questionness (which will be tackled in more detail in the next chapter). Although it is dominating and ineradicable, it is concealed with different answers. These are: 1) a state of passivity and waiting, which disowns its own initiative in favor of effectiveness managed by scientific-technical powers; 2) a maverick sort of attitude searching for its own answer to what is happening, skeptical by nature towards mainstream messages and yet lacking proper competencies and simultaneously being unaware of it; 3) an approach founded upon “animalistic-defense” mechanisms and resorting to aggressive behaviors deprived of rational control; 4) an attitude of instrumental activism, which is “driven” only by self-interest and benefits only itself; 5) an attitude of heroic activism, oftentimes implemented during voluntary service and in the name of higher values, assuming the form of a mission. Each of these attitudes has its own variant of the pandemic experience of space and time, as well as its unique experience of body and of the Others. Also, the emotional note, as well as its intensity, varies across the said attitudes, with the note being a motivating reason for particular behaviors. However, delving into such issues would require several separate and detailed studies...

### III. The state of the pandemic as a state of experience in the mode of questionableness

The above-mentioned attitudes are different types of answers that individuals assume towards the extraordinary experience of pandemic happenings. These answers are characterized by the fact that they are as “necessary” as they are inadequate.<sup>8</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, they only partially fulfill questioning intentions, invoking and sustaining the state of disappointment. Where does this inadequacy come from?

28 The following hypothesis is lying in wait to be justified: what constitutes an essence of an experience, is the fact that the experience reaches certainty through direct contact, which, under the pandemic and due to the recommendation to keep distance, is thwarted. The possibility of getting infected with the virus paralyzes and hinders our experience, which, under normal conditions, indulges itself with being fully blown. Therefore, the state of the pandemic is the experience of the world, in which on experiences—not on the side of the world, but on the side of experience itself—a certain refusal: one experiences that one ought not to experience. Thus, the experience has a sort of inherent character: it leans out, then retreats, unfolds and folds in itself, goes out towards the world with the latter being open to it; and yet, there cannot be (or should not be) any meeting point between the two. In this way, it cannot develop or become a full experience; hence, it cannot be an adequate experience either. In consequence, it becomes “hungrier” for the world, even more questioning, which in turn encourages to stick to any answers that—albeit inadequate—are able to mute the uncomfortable state of questionableness.

In order to justify the above hypothesis, let us attempt to closely characterize the experience of pandemic happenings.<sup>9</sup> We provisionally described it as the experience that something is happening and we do not know exactly what it is. That is why probably the best expression of this experience is the

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking of necessity and (in)adequacy, we use these concepts in the colloquial, rather than technical sense, with the latter use being adhered to by, say, Husserl. Cf. Husserl 1976, §138.

<sup>9</sup> The leading thread of further characteristics of this experience represent the theses from the author’s book *Esej z filozofii dziejów* (cf. Sobota 2018).

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question: “What is happening?” As a matter of course, it does not have to be articulated in the manner depicted here. Instead, this question constitutes an ideal expression of the experience of pandemic happenings, which, as a state of questionableness, opens up a wide array of possibilities and invokes in the experiencing subject the desire to find an answer among them. Different issues related to that were indicated above. Thus far, we have been considering the experience of the pandemic from the perspective of space; yet, delving more deeply into it, it seems obvious that it is also a very significant experience of time. After all, the question is clearly of temporal structure: it assumes certain foreknowledge, which points to experience hitherto accumulated and to the state of knowledge on the part of the questioning person, as well as it relates to ignorance, the illumination of which is expected in the near future. The desire for knowledge reaches far into the future, and is suspended up to the moment of finding the proper or the most proximate answer.

In line with the clues presented above, let us try to elucidate the essence of these three fundamental moments of the pandemic experience, that is of questioning, time, and experience as such, in order to ultimately unify them. In this way, we shall gain an insight into what is the fundamental experience of the pandemic, with the pandemic urging us to assume the said attitudes towards it. 29

First, the question “What is happening?” not only expresses the feeling of what is happening during the pandemic, but also seems to amount to a perfect expression of what the experience as such is. It sounds rather peculiar at first: however, especially considering the fact that experience requires direct contiguity of the subject with the given content, it is the experience “face to face.” It is firsthand experience. This contact with a thing, which, in line with the etymology of the word “contactus,” means first and foremost “touch,” may be understood in a certain analogy to touching.<sup>10</sup> We touch things, but things also touch us (*contigere*): they happen to us, they are contingent. If it makes sense at all to compare experience to one of our senses—even if this sense is to be considered (following Aristotle) fundamental (*De anima*, 413

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10 On the understanding of experience as residing, “being-with,” and touching cf. Heidegger 1987, 81.

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b 5)—, then, while considering the essence of the experience of happenings, what deserves to be emphasized is not only its directness, but also—and perhaps most of all—the moment of suspension inhering in touch, vigilance, readiness to retreat, which during the pandemic is brought to the fore. This element is missing in hearing or visual experience, with both of these senses operating from a distance. This is because touch operates on the border of the subject, which—during contact—an object may violate and like a virus may enter into its organism. Such is also the pandemic experience, which is centered around touch—however, negatively: it makes efforts to avoid touch. Because touch is this special sense, which can turn a toucher into the touched, avoiding touching something is only a part of the survival strategy during the pandemic. The ultimate end is not to be “touched” by the disease. This concern for insulating experience from its full natural development thwarts the intentional movement somehow at the middle of the road. This preventing, stopping, or suspending of the experience characterizing the living conditions under the pandemic is manifested in its other aspects. Whereas, normally, an experiencing subject delves into the content of the world, experiences it directly, somehow forgetting himself, during the pandemic, experience clearly oscillates between two poles of an intentional arc, that is between the subject and object, thus exposing their distinctness and their mutually incongruent modes of existence.

We already stated that in touch, which might be regarded as a model of experience as such, there inheres a peculiar pre-reflective movement: while touching, one experiences oneself as touched by what is being touched. And that is the point: there is no experience without an experiencing subject—much the same as there is nothing experienced without an experiencing subject. Hegel, for example, expressed this in the following manner: “The principle of experience contains the infinitely important determination that human beings must themselves be involved when taking up a given content and holding it to be true, more precisely that they must find such content to be united and in unison with the certainty of themselves.” (Hegel 2010, 35) Experience is an encounter, in which its object is given together with the subject’s self-awareness. Hegel described this knowledge as certainty. However, the exact opposite is the case—especially during the pandemic. Experiencing

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something, we are somehow put to a test. In the face of an object, which is not fully determined, a subject experiences their ignorance towards it, their limitations as well as their finitude (Gadamer 2004, 350–351). Experiencing themselves, a subject experiences their individuality and uniqueness. Whereas, normally, this individuality pertains both to the content of experience and to the experiencing subject themselves, in the case of the pandemic, its communal dimension is projected onto the said uniqueness of experience and of its poles: humankind experiences the world or the world experiences humankind in a specific negative way. Still, the said exposition of the subjective character of the experience in the mode of questionableness is perfectly reflected in the experience of the pandemic, with this experience, by opening itself to reality, permanently considering the question of who experiences (as an individual or a community)—and mainly doing so with respect to its physical helplessness and “vulnerability.” It seems that—contrary to ordinary experience, which “leaps” into the world and thus loses awareness of itself—the experience of the pandemic goes as far as to expose—during its encounter with the world—its own subjecthood, which presents itself in the mode of bodily feebleness and vulnerability.

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While talking about experience, we already took heed of its temporal aspect. The pandemic—as noted above—radically impacts our experience of space; still, the pandemic mainly concerns extraordinary time: “the time of the pandemic.” Certainly, each experience is extended over time: with its point of departure being what was experienced in the past, it is oriented toward what is new; in other words, it is inclined towards the future. The so-called collecting and searching for new experience, which are synonymous with getting to know the world and which during the pandemic are hindered, refer to what was unknown before. Experience—as Gadamer contended—is open (Gadamer 2004, 347). The relation between new experiences and the prior ones is of peculiar—dialectical—nature. New experience neither negates nor invalidates any other prior experience. Gadamer says: „Every experience has the structure of question.” (Gadamer 2004, 356) In the course of questioning, experience brings an answer. However, it is not an absolute answer, which would not yield itself to further questioning. Acquired experiences do not cancel each other out. Instead, not giving up their distinctness, they undergo some characteristic

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aggregation (although not a closure), during which each new experience more or less alters *the entirety* of previously acquired experience. This means that experience also leans towards the past—that is, towards the experience, which was already acquired. The experiencing consciousness, shifting from one experience to another, sort of “turns back” (Gadamer 2004, 349). This turning-back encounters not only the favorableness, but also a resistance of what it turns to. The experience of the pandemic exposes this change clearly and painfully. A change in people’s lifestyle is so radical that this next experience does not so much clearly dissociate itself from a “before,” from “the way it used to be,” while reifying the latter into the form of a pre-pandemic “history,” as it calls into question its hitherto operative sense. Because past experiences become clearly distinguished from what is happening now and the former’s sense is called into question, as the future is not there yet and we are uncertain of what the future has in store, the pandemic experience is the experience of time, which—as a whole—got somehow stopped. During the pandemic, one lives in the mean-time between what is past and what is about to come. The state of the pandemic is a state, in which the entirety of time is experienced from the perspective of the question: “What is happening?”

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That is why—taking into consideration this tight connection between experience and time—Gadamer rightly notes that “genuine experience is experience of one’s own history” (Gadamer 2004, 351). One could say that as much as history is precisely what is happening, what actually becomes history proper, as time goes by, thus becoming what is *not* happening (history is often associated with “old history”), so does experience, understood as what directly and vividly refers us to the world, under the influence of time, become our experience, that is, it “makes us experienced.” Both experience and history are characterized by the same passive-active structure—experience accrues in the experiencing subject and, thus, the former is a decisive factor for the latter’s being experienced. Experience and history are brought closer together also by the fact that what experience refers to is not an object facing the subject, but the very influence one exerts on the other. Experience is what *we* are doing, but also what *it* does with us. The same applies to history. This influence, these happenings happen between the subject and an object. One can say that every experience is an experience of history broadly understood. However, such a

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relation does not hold between experience and history understood in a much narrower sense, that is, that something is happening here. This means that not every experience is an experience of history in the strict sense. Instead, there exists the need for a certain specification, which—in the movement between something and nothing—allows for the possibility of experiencing the dispute between the old and the new; that is, that something is happening here. That something is happening—although we do know what, exactly—, is given onto us in a certain feeling; that is, as anxiety, enthusiasm, or fear. The experience of history implies the awareness of the fact that *something* is happening here though *nothing* certain is known about it. It is a form of knowledge-ignorance, which can be easily identified with an attitude of expectation, hope, or question, for that matter. The said attitude constitutes the subjective factor of experiencing history, which allows for an experience of history in its total stillness (“silence before the storm”). The movement of history does not have to manifest itself in any spectacular way, although, in fact, it does usually contain elements of a spectacle.

This connection of temporal characteristics of experience with its openness is constitutive of its historicalness to such an extent that, as Richard Schaeffler put it, “possibility of history lies in the ability to experience” (Schaeffler 1973, 212). This situation is perfectly represented by the experience of the pandemic. One could actually venture to describe the said experience as an experience of historical character. In fact, historically speaking, the times of a pandemic always did have an all-embracing historical dimension; it was a process intersecting with the course of history and distorting its trajectory, with the process constituting the time of a deep crisis.<sup>11</sup> Unlike in the case of “an ordinary disease,” which afflicts selected individuals, the pandemic has an all-embracing nature and it is of everybody’s concern. Thus, the community of people at risk is formed. Not only is my individual world undergoing transformation—as in the case of going through an ordinary disease—, but during the pandemic also the world we share changes.

The experience of time is—as is well-known—an experience of change (Aristotle 2018, 221b); the latter has a special character in the experience of the

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11 On the notion of crisis cf. Koselleck 2009, 221–235.

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34 pandemic, the character tallying well with the situation of something unknown happening. Although the pandemic has natural causes, it is not experienced from the perspective of an objective natural time, but rather as a time of life, the immanent mobility of which has been significantly altered.<sup>12</sup> As an experience that something is happening, the pandemic is first and foremost the experience of movement. Movement appears in two shapes. First, the hitherto operative movement of life gets suddenly thwarted. In place of daily chores, there appears stillness. However, this stillness is not experienced as peace, but rather as the already-mentioned “silence before the storm.” It accumulates energy and, hence, contains a clear tension in itself. Tension, in turn, builds up a sort of internal, invisible mobility of the observed stillness. It is this mobility that allows us to appreciate the historical character of the occurring situation. This is not a uniform motion, which, quite like absolute stillness, is precisely an exemplar of the situation that *nothing* is happening. Although there are some happenings going on here, due to the lack of changes in the movement itself, it is difficult to claim that anything is happening here. On the other hand, the totally chaotic movement, with objects erratically moving to-and-fro, cannot translate into the experience that *something* is happening here. The happening occurs between the said something and nothing. Note that, instead of nothing, we are still talking about something—namely, that *something* is happening here, that something being still indeterminate. One can say that between being something and nothing there is being itself—the fact that there is something, that is, the state of the pandemic. However, this is not a natural fact, devoid of any significance. What is meant in this case, is not just-being, being-itself. Rather, that something, albeit indeterminate, is by no means empty, but grants significance and gravity to the fact of being, depicting the latter as important. Therefore, the experience of history is not the experience of *that*, which is happening—this *that* is precisely the unknown. Thus, the experience of history is the experience that *something* is happening. The experience of pandemic happenings is the experience of something between “that” and “something,” and, thus, of the event of something indeterminate. To validly speak of history,

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12 On immanent mobility of life cf. Heidegger 1994, 117–123. Movements of existence are tackled by Jan Patočka (Patočka 1991, 226).

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it takes fundamental changes; the latter are the ones in the substance itself, with the changes running in an unrecognized direction. This very running occurs at a variable rate. This is also supplemented with irreversibility and uniqueness of historical movement, and also with the fact that the movement itself is not related to some part of reality, but to the whole of it. This, in turn, gives the impression of ubiquity, which requires of the subject—whether they want it or not—to join, to participate—which is perceived as the requirement to take a stand and make a decision, as well as to bear responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of a ubiquitous change and the need for a decision—as mentioned above—would not be possible if in the experience of the pandemic, *possibility* would not be exposed as a dominating modality of experience. Under the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, the change in one's life is not caused by the fact that somebody *actually* fell ill, but that they *can* fall ill. The difference between the state of the pandemic and the fact of going through a disease consists in that the former requires an adjustment in the behavior not only on the part of ill people, but also the healthy ones. A healthy person ought to behave in such a way as to avoid contracting the disease. This, in turn, implies that—in comparison with normal conditions—the possibilities of contracting the disease are greater. On the one hand, one experiences those possibilities negatively. First, because the pandemic exposes the possibility of the person's death and the death of the person's loved ones. Death, which—as Heidegger perceived it—is normally viewed as something nebulous and as a rather distant and indeterminate possibility (Heidegger 1987, 293–296), in the case of the risk of getting infected with the virus becomes a rather concrete possibility, which is “lurking for us just around the corner.” Second, a possibility is experienced negatively due to the lack of things one was able to do before. The state of the pandemic is the state of closedness, in which a set of opportunities shrinks. The situation is experienced in a way similar to a prisoner experiencing the world. On the other hand, the state of closedness urges to establish new opportunities, with that state of closedness being at the same time a question, which, in turn, is itself—as Gadamer put it—a field of open

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<sup>13</sup> During the pandemic, one very often hears the appeals to be responsible (for oneself and for others)!

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positive opportunities. Narrowing down the field of available opportunities enhances creativity. Furthermore, a protracted lock-down finally provokes us into directing our thoughts at the times “after the pandemic,” with these times being filled with different scenarios.

36 This change in the internal modality of the content of experience invokes one issue, which cannot be ignored in the experience of pandemic happenings: this is the issue of sense, values, goals, and, hence, the whole axiological aspect of experience. We already mentioned that, although the pandemic is anchored in the law of nature, its consequences seem to reach the highest peaks of culture. Pre-pandemic life carries on according to definite and stable duties stemming from the adopted values. Although they are thematized on the side of the content of experience as the properties of things and behaviors, they actually belong to the realm of *the way* they are experienced. They are “subjective” ways of referring to reality, the ways of its interpretations, which fill the axiological and semantic reality with content. Conforming to certain norms, gives our daily lives a character of normality (Husserl 1973, 117). During the pandemic, which distances us from reality and, thus, excessively extends the intentional arc, what is getting revealed, are the ways of referring thereto—also in the appurtenant axiological aspects—with the said revelation being such that these ways are getting somewhat shaky. It is as if opening the intentional relation and illuminating it through the light of consciousness would cause a certain “panic” among the prior, well-organized, and stable meanings, goals, and values. In this layer, there arises an analogous alarm caused by the virus entering an organism. This shakiness of the layer of sense consists in the shift and change in the status affecting what ought to be. Normally closer to what is and to what must be, what ought to be, during the pandemic gets shifted towards the realm of possibility. Leaving “is” and “must be,” which together determine the so-called normalcy, duty or “what ought to be” become only what is *possible*. And because, necessarily, there exists not just one possibility, but a possibility always implies that there are alternatives to it, redefining a duty in terms of what is possible reveals a wide array of possibilities, which were hitherto concealed. As a matter of course, what plays a crucial role in activating these possibilities, is time, which—as we stated before—is experienced not in terms of the present moment, but in the entirety of its ecstasies. The latter are

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not empty forms of intuition; instead, they carry a rich meaningful content (on the one hand—tradition; on the other—futuristic visions).

And, finally, the last issue characterizing the ontological side of the experience of the pandemic: the experience of the pandemic is an extraordinary experience of questionableness, during which new behaviors and habits are established. After all, experience is not a pure “spiritual” form of cognition from “the bird’s eye view,” but, from its inception onwards, remains embodied and realized in a particular action. As we noted above, during the pandemic, which separates us from reality—with reality being normally a field of specific possibilities—, one must learn new behaviors, which are, on the one hand, recommended under the implemented “sanitary regime” (wearing a mask, gloves, staying at home, keeping a distance, etc.); and which, on the other hand, refer to the daily routines not related to the problem of the virus (work, leisure, entertainment, sport, celebrating, eating, etc.). In each of these cases, there will emerge new behaviors, which, before they will become “ritualized,” must be properly adopted. Quite like actors, we must learn new roles. It is also in this case that the entire issue reduces to the problem of our relation to reality, with the relation being distorted by the pandemic. In each of the cases, the difficulty with adopting new behaviors does not consist in what we do, but in how to do it. Each action has its ergonomic optimum, which—while the action in question is repeated and tried over and over again—becomes discovered and adopted. And action, finally, “kicks in” and finds its internal equilibrium. However, this must not be understood in automatic-physiological terms, but, rather, in terms of vivid bodiliness (*Leib*). Here, we are touching upon a distinct independent issue, which goes far beyond the usual talk of human action (also in phenomenology); namely, the mere talk of “realizing” certain opportunities. Physical resistance of the world, the mass of the matter, effort and work of our muscles perhaps comprise the most important moments of this issue, which are experienced in the pre-expressive order. They are described by eidetic laws, the determination of which takes place in the course of exercises and experiments (Barba and Savarese 2005). Under the pandemic, some of them are even somehow physically cognized while adopting new behaviors. Thus, behaviors under the pandemic are not habitual, but are instead marked with a sort of innovativeness and uniqueness: they constitute certain attempts, searching,

learning, which errs and succeeds. And, so, it is clear how daily behavior, even in its most physical, bodily-oriented aspects, reveals a dominating trait of the pandemic experience, which is questionableness.

## Conclusion

The state of the pandemic is a special state for many reasons—including cognitive ones. What seems to be under normal conditions well connected and merged to such an extent that its constituents are so tightly fastened they are barely distinguishable, under the pandemic gets loosened, distorted, somehow thwarted, and decomposed. The relations are loosened, seams start to appear, cracks start to emerge, and differences become more pronounced; internal questionableness of reality is, thus, revealed, one could say, in its naked form. Cognitive benefits that the pandemic occasioned are probably the least related to the virus itself, which—already mentioned—constitutes the most far-reaching, and simultaneously the most mysterious pole of an intentional arc. What is more important, is how much under these conditions we find out about ourselves.

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The pandemic revealed the fact that what inheres in our relations to reality is a certain conflict of experiences, the poles of which constitute different sorts of—more or less justified—answers, and the dominating feeling of questionableness, with questionableness being incongruent with any of these answers. It turns out that also scientific answers—which in their trivialized and popularized form reach the public opinion—cannot soothe the anxiety of the question. However, it may be the case that what the pandemic revealed through its influence is not only the state resulting from the occurring danger brought about by a transmission of the virus. Instead, what was caused by the pandemic, may be also a certain state of culture stemming from the deepest and long-term tendencies. From the medical perspective, the COVID-19 virus entering an organism exposes the latter's weak spots and makes the already operating diseases more severe. By the same token, from the cultural perspective, the experience of the virus exposes the conflicts and infirmities existing within culture itself. The dogma—inculcated in our minds and dominating us from the very early years of socialization and education onwards—that in the

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face of the collapse of earlier strategies of dealing with our ignorance only science can provide satisfactory answers to the experience of questionableness ceaselessly haunting our existence leaves us completely helpless in the face of the situation, in which there is a lack of scientific solutions able to mute the said questionableness of being. Enchanted by the unquestionable effectiveness of scientific achievements, we almost completely resigned ourselves from developing alternative forms of cognition, which could prove more “fitting” with the situation of augmented uncertainty. There is nothing similar nowadays to, say, an Attic tragedy, which exposed a Greek to uncertainties of fortune and made him persevere with it despite his fear. Although, sooner or later, due to the development of our scientific-technical potential, we will cope with the current pandemic, and, thus, yet again the experience of the fundamental questionableness of being will be “called to order” and the problem of the diseases will be ultimately solved, it will not disappear completely. The state of spiritual helplessness, into which we are driven by scientific-technical progress in the face of the questionableness of being further deteriorates, and one cannot see any prospects to reverse this process through scientific methods.

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