

Humanness in the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to worldwide lockdowns and social distancing measures. Speculations about prehistoric human development, when cave-man and cave-women survived and advanced in seclusion serve as an analogy for today's lockdowns in order to derive inference about a potential future of humankind after the pandemic. Researchers at the University of Vienna study the group dynamics and socio-psychological impact of crises as a driver of human advancement. As these researchers outline, in the history of humankind, seclusion in caves held enormous potential for societal development, which may also apply today in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic. During periods when natural disasters made exterior living conditions dangerous, human hiding themselves in caves developed so-called "cave competencies." These key advancements grew when people had to seclude themselves from society – e.g., during natural disasters, volcanic eruptions, but also during pandemics, such as the great plague of the 14th century. Starting out in analyzing the currently-ongoing work on cave competencies, this article then embarks on highlighting potentially constructive effects of the COVID-19 crisis, following M. Davis Cross' crisis transition to a new Renaissance. The individual decision-making during crises is captured in its potential to extracting a particular common welfare enhancement in cooperative behavior. Altruism and reciprocity based on trust are outlined as important steps towards cooperation. An archetype of the renewed ethos is formed on the basis of a community of interest and is supported by the coordination of long-term cooperation and the particular interests of the participants in dialogue maintenance, as well as their fine attunement to empathic communication. Differing motivations, communication network frictions and free rider problems are discussed as potential obstacles of strengthening the social glue during a pandemic. Group psychology of collective coping strategies as well as the long-term coordination of intergenerational cooperation are outlined with particular attention to the digital world the pandemic has fortified.

KEYWORDS: Altruism, Archetype, Catharsis, Cave competences, Common welfare, Communication networks, Community of interest, Cooperation, Coordination of long-term cooperation, Coping strategies, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Crisis management, Dialogue, Digitalization, Empathic communication, Free rider problems, Group psychology, Humanness, Imagination, Lockdown, New Renaissance, Pandemic, Philosophy, Resilience, Social distancing, Social welfare, Transition economics, Trust

Philosophical foundations

There are different philosophical foundations to explaining the current COVID-19 pandemic mindset of individuals and societal implications. Iranian-born political philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo writes in his book "The courage to exist – a philosophy of life and death in the age of coronavirus" that the coronavirus pandemic has challenged basic human values (Jahanbegloo 2020). The pandemic is what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*, a special moment that allows the *Zeitgeist* to change the spirit of the times. The essence of the coronavirus on a civilizational scale is to draw humanity's attention to global threats such as climate change. Today, philosophers such as Bruno Latour are proposing to build a "new normality" in which the fight against climate change will take center stage (Delanty 2020).

Israeli philosopher Yuval Harari (2020) argues that the pandemic should have given impetus to international scientific cooperation based on the free information exchange.

Another current philosophical direction associated with the coronavirus is existentialism. Common to existentialists are two categories: the first is that death gives meaning to life. The second consists in the “throwing” (*Geworfenheit*) of a person into the world. One of the main challenges is living an authentic life in everyday situations. In connection with existentialism, it is common to recall a philosopher who did not consider himself an existentialist yet became renowned for being a key figure on existentialism – Albert Camus. In the philosophical novel “The Plague,” Camus writes that in a world devoid of meaning, the plague becomes a moral opportunity to find oneself in the struggle for the common good. The plague is an evil incarnate, but it helps people rise above themselves. The presence of empathy becomes a sign of health in society enabling community formation (Peters 2020).

According to Delanty (2020), the philosophy of utilitarianism in relation to the coronavirus sees the desired result of obtaining herd immunity. The Kantian alternative to utilitarianism prioritizes human dignity, which outweighs the common good in importance. The Kantian argument contradicts the utilitarian position, namely the maxim that the end justifies the means. But the Kantian argument, taken to the absolute, means that it is necessary to use resources to save the hopeless sick at the expense of those who can be saved. The ethical duty of the state is to protect all lives, without distinguishing between the lives of different people in terms of value.

The third philosophical position in the controversy is called libertarianism. This line of thought puts human freedom at the forefront. According to libertarians, the measures that states are taking to combat the coronavirus violate the personal freedom of citizens (Delanty 2020). Achille Mbembe, a philosopher from Cameroon, explores how governments decide who lives and who dies, as well as how someone lives and someone dies (Mbembe & Bercito 2020). As Mbembe points out, the human body has become a threat to others, and there has been a “democratization of the power to kill.” Isolation is the way to control this power. “People go back to ‘chez-soi’ (French - home) – as if the worst thing that could happen would be to die outside home” (Mbembe & Bercito 2020).

Bulgarian philosopher Yulia Kristeva (2020) identifies three definitions of a globalized person – solitude experienced as loneliness, intolerance of restrictions and suppression of the thought of one’s mortality. Such a person cheated on himself during the pandemic. As Giorgio Agamben (2020) writes in *Explained*, people have been able to sacrifice social relationships, jobs, religious and political beliefs in order not to get sick. The state of emergency, which was introduced temporarily, has become the norm. People are so accustomed to living in an incessant crisis that they do not notice how their life turns into biological existence. A society that operates in a permanent state of emergency cannot be free (Agamben 2020). Survival has become an absolute, as if we were living during a period of war, concludes the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2020). Survival society is losing understanding of what a good life is (Byung-Chul Han 2020).

Overall, the current situation is a narrative of the history of today, presented in the first person of the writer, but correlated with the social background of our time. The narrative of today as the living of real experience awaits a generalizing reflection of its potential on behalf of future generations. In this regard, it becomes relevant to refer to the experience of transdisciplinary research, which makes it possible to feel the existential situation and put it into words. In transdisciplinary research, personal and paradigmatic research experiences meet. Transdisciplinarity exists as an articulation of the ordinary and the theoretical in the complexity of life. According to complexity theory, historical events have the ability to reproduce in new circumstances. Remakes of historical events evokes a rethinking of what constitutes the nature of humanness in the new era (Kiyashchenko & Golofast 2018, 2020).

Cave competencies

Historically, crises often have become hallmarks of societal advancement after all. External shock therapies bled into times of societal pressure that – in the end – often pushed humankind toward social advancement, for some parts due to a stark natural selection effect (Gelter & Puaschunder 2021). During times of pandemics but also natural disasters, when human were forced into seclusion and social distancing by hiding in caves, humankind surprisingly often came out stronger than before. People hiding in caves developed so-called “cave competencies,” which are currently studies by researchers at the University of Vienna (Grimm forthcoming).

The leap in a favorable direction during crises is for one explained by a natural selection effect as those who could adapt to a challenging surrounding survived. “Cavers” were more likely to estimate risks and imagine future consequences, and they were able to maintain a natural circadian rhythm without being guided by changes in natural light. Psychologically stronger, more self-reflective and cooperative individuals with better sensitivity to the passage of time, a better ability to discount risk over time, and with better social competences had a natural advantage when caving together.

In cave groups, cooperation, compassion and care for fellow group members evolved. Some say the distinction between humans and animals began when individuals suffering from injuries that would have been fatal when living alone were cured out by helping each other in groups. For instance, life-threatening fractures of essential bones like that of hips or legs, were first survived in the evolution of humankind because other group members took care of the injured during the healing process. This trait only developed in human. Humans were the only species in the position to recover when fellow group members had the compassion to take care of the sick until they could get up again and take care of themselves. This form of altruism is a uniquely humane-reflective and emotionally-driven feature. It would therefore be compassion that distinguished human from animal in the evolution. Care of another developed more accentuated during times of crises and when living in caves together (Puaschunder & Gelter forthcoming).

People in seclusion also learned to live in groups in congested places and handle their emotions during stress. Cavers are also believed to have developed better imagination in seclusion (Grimm forthcoming). In the history of humankind, the ability to engage in inner dialogue and use of imagination to mentally flee cramped surroundings often prospered when human were isolated during times of crises. As anthropologists infer from cave drawings, the paintings’ sophistication advanced over time and may have been linked to the evolutionary rise into new forms of humans that could use their imagination to travel in their minds. Scholars now have summed up the achievements of the brain and social development during times of social seclusion as “cave competences” (Grimm forthcoming). The ability to deal with oneself in a turbulent world in the eye of risk and uncertainty in a group in a congested place was also a key driver in developing the courage to open up new opportunities for expansion after crises, for example when Europeans landed in North America in the century after the Great Plague of the 14th century in Asia and Europe.

Not to idealize COVID lockdowns or envisioning going to Mars these days, the novel Coronavirus pandemic has shock-forced society to socially-distance as never before during modernity. Drawing from the potential rise of “cave competences” during the pandemic, one could derive inferences for the future developments of humankind and society. As the fear of a virus contagion through human contact led to lockdowns in all major economies around the globe, human caved as never before in modern times. This extraordinary situation already now has led to an advancement wave in digitalization, social justice call and imagination to attempt bold and new endeavors, such as flying to Mars, online learning and shifting fiat money and entire economies to cryptocurrencies (Puaschunder 2021b).

Constructive effects of crises

Having started in 2019, the novel Coronavirus COVID-19 has to this day led to over 230 million reported infections with COVID-19 and almost 5 million deaths reported around the world (Worldometer 2021). The way we live, work and interact has dramatically changed due to the global pandemic. COVID-19 had a socio-psychological impetus on society (Gelter & Puaschunder 2021; Puaschunder & Gelter forthcoming; Puaschunder, Gelter & Sharma 2020).

This article acknowledges the ambivalent nature of the COVID crisis with an accentuation of constructive effects. Drawing from the work of M. Davis Cross (2015), who writes about the transition from crisis to catharsis, but also from behavioral insights that outline that human decision-making is challenged by crises (Puaschunder 2021a), this article portrays the Coronavirus crisis as a sharp shock update of decision-making mechanisms but also underlines the solution of long-standing problems via the crisis (Kiyashchenko & Golofast 2018, 2021).

Every crisis may have also favorable positive externalities. For one, crises points may contribute to the resiliency structure of the community (Brunnermeier 2021). Society may be forced to focusing on the transition from an individualistic position aimed at extracting a particular good to cooperative behavior in order to maximize the public good. Crises may therefore often proceed the individual from the position of selfish altruism to cooperation steps that may be hindered by “free rider problems.” Research in the fields of psychology and sociology of management shows the most favorable for the community is the construction of interaction according to the principle of reciprocity, based on the fragmentation of trust (Schelling 1981) in specific situations. However, this type of interaction is possible with the unity of the core values, while applied motivations may differ (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993). In this case, communication is built according to the logic of “concentric circles”, when the greatest solidarity and mutual assistance is manifested by the core of the group, while communication with other participants is coordinated on the basis of “weak ties.”

Research on coping psychology (Frankl 2020) on group behavior overlaps with research on the ethos of group interaction. According to the works of the Russian philosopher Prof. Dr. Kiyashchenko, the archetype of the renewed ethos is formed on the basis of a community of interest and is supported by the coordination of long-term cooperation and the particular interests of the participants in dialogue maintenance, as well as their fine attunement to empathic communication. In the digital age, these competencies help transcend national boundaries, pushing apart frontiers in the “exchange zone” (Galison 2004) of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Coronavirus COVID-19 Great Reset Potential

Drawing inferences from the rising trend of “cave competences,” society will likely grow more attentive to each other’s health and well-being in the post-COVID era to come. COVID-19 also already heralded a pro-active care for maintaining a healthy workforce. A healthy workplace environment and an employee culture of care will likely become an essential corporate feature to attract qualified labor, whose bargaining power has already increased during COVID in the eye of labor shortages in human-facing industries and positions. The overall long-term well-being of employees including preventive care in teams will become a key issue and competitive advantage to attract a productive workforce for employers of tomorrow (Gelter & Puaschunder 2021; Puaschunder & Gelter forthcoming).

Working from home will have changed employees to become more independent and personal time-sensitive but also more focused on the health and well-being of their immediate surrounding (Gelter & Puaschunder 2021; Puaschunder 2020). Future employers will have to develop empathy and a holistic understanding of health and responsible self-care of prevention in harmony with society and the environment (Puaschunder & Gelter forthcoming). A shared

culture of group prevention but also the luxury in salutogenesis funded and supported by the employer that nurtures a healthy and ecologically-harmonious lifestyle will be future competitive advantages of employers and fringe benefits to attract scarce labor (Gelter & Puaschunder 2021). Learning-in-teams to prevent contagion will become a new endogenous growth factor when considering the risk of long-term debilitation of trained key personnel after a COVID-19 infection (Puaschunder & Gelter forthcoming; Puaschunder, Gelter & Sharma 2020). The longer COVID-19 prevails, the more this trend may extend it to all sorts of industries and society domains.

Comparative analyses of mental processes and functions in conditions of joint activity are distinguished by the levels of interconnectedness of activity subjects. At the level of “tacit co-presence,” the state of a person changes in comparison with how the psycho-physiology functions in solitude states. While at the level of stronger mutual influences, factors such as co-excitation, imitation, conformity, change in the threshold of individual sensitivity are included in the regulation of mental activity. A comparative analysis of the psycho-motor skills of individual and joint actions shows differences in the accuracy, speed and efficiency of work as a synergistic effect of collective action (Communication Problem in Psychology 1981, p. 42). The reaction time and the magnitude of its spread vary greatly, not only depending on the functional state of a person, but also on the characteristics of communication partners: their functional state, degree of activity, speech productivity, resistance to interference, social significance of relationships with a communication partner. Among the physiological reactions, numerous facts of coincidence of pulse oscillations and reminiscent of resonance processes, deserve attention. The phenomenon is revealed only with simultaneous activity in the mutual presence (Communication Problem in Psychology 1981, 193).

Communication disbalances up to group disintegration are largely associated with changes in the group structure in the process of creative problem solving. Along the progress through the phases of creative problem solving, relationships intensity and structure fluctuate from those inherent in a well-organized team to those inherent in a poorly organized group, and vice versa. The mobility of intragroup role differentiation is characteristic of most of the processes of solving a creative problem, while the stability and uniqueness of role attributes are usually present only in the initial and final phases of the problem-solving process (Communication Problem in Psychology 1981, pp. 89-90). A “spacious” relationship allows for a reversal of “roles.” The ability to maintain this attitude despite changes in the positions of each of the members is the special ability of a person to communicate. Functional relationships, in which the other is regarded as an object, are extremely fragile, since they lie outside the personal qualities of communicating people – these qualities do not fit into this type of relationship, and often only interfere with their functioning. The ability to speak the truth in communication is ethically equivalent to the recognition of the personality in another person, and therefore, his or her right to a different opinion and behavior.

Taking into account human interaction presupposes a constructive combination of internal and external, which gives rise to a compendium of transdisciplinary generalization. When we talk about the level of humanness, we cognitively rise to the level of philosophical generalizations in a meta-position that takes into account the relationship between the internal and the external in a human and the distribution of responsibility between the personal and the collective existential frames. The resource of such understanding can be represented by a transdisciplinary approach in science, which passes through real economic, legal and managerial mechanisms (Kiyashchenko 2015, 2017, 2020).

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