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Introduction

Rediscovering and Revaluing the Urgency of Thinking in the Time of Crisis

The present issue of *Philosophical Movement*, *Ruch Filozoficzny*, the oldest Polish Philosophical Journal (1911–), is published, just when the world believes that it is getting out, slowly but surely, of yet another crisis, the pandemic Covid-19. The way the world was and is dealing with the pandemic is a subject of passionate debate among politicians, medical care representatives, academics, and the entire world population. Many of us are asking critical questions regarding rules and restrictions, often imposed on us against our will. However, there is also a significant number within the general population, who are blindly following the official orders. Dealing with the pandemics discloses the fundamental importance of being aware of how we, in fact, do understand life in all its facets. It problematizes our understanding of risk, from avoiding the risk of infection to save our own life and the lives of others, to risking our lives for contributing to the efficient operation of different organizational structures. From the hermeneutic perspective, we consider the pandemic as an event which calls for understanding. We pose the question about what is happening in us and with us when we are exposed to the virus, and we learn from this experience about being a human being while facing our fragility without reducing our self-understanding to being healthy, i.e., free of the disease. We thematize health and illness

in their unstable equilibrium.¹ With Giorgio Agamben, we ask the old biblical question, whether health is really everything there is, for us. (Jn 5: 6) By perpetuating our fear for our lives, we open the way for political systems to become systems of totalitarianism.² Agamben's *homo sacer* signifies a person who can be killed without the killer being regarded as a murderer, and a person who cannot be sacrificed. Thus, *homo sacer* can be expunged from society and deprived of rights and functions in civil religion. We **are** *homo sacer*, available to be killed, but not sacrificed. With reference to Michel Foucault's fragmentary analysis of biopolitics, we ask if we might need a different version of biopolitics to combat the pandemic and offer a distinctly broader perspective to achieve a more solidary perspective of social life during and after the crisis.³ Taking seriously the politicization of our lives, we critically engage the question of the (im)possibility of a new notion of the political, if we are to offer a phronetically viable answer to the global crisis.⁴

In the book of Proverbs, we read: "The weapons of the understanding are the lips of the wise." (Proverbs 14:13) Wisdom is a matter of discerning carefully. In a Latin translation, "*in labiis sapientis invenitur sapientia,*"

¹ Andrzej Wierciński, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, ed., Giovanni Stanghellini, Andrea Raballo, Matthew Broome, Anthony Vincent Fernandez, Paolo Fusar-Poli, and René Rosfort (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), especially, "Health as Unstable Equilibrium: A Hermeneutic Approach to Medical Practice," and "Understanding Illness: The Task of Interpretation," 65–68.

² The state of emergency is a classical example. Agamben reminds us that Hitler, in 1933, also declared a state of emergency Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

³ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, transl. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴ It is very inspiring to read Slavoj Žižek's plea for reinventing communism in order to address adequately the pandemic of inequality and oppose it to the tyranny of the capitalist market. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020). However, many of the suggested readings of the social inequality and the call for solidarity were succinctly and poignantly expressed by Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*. Cf. No. 19: "Neither individuals nor nations should regard the possession of more and more goods as the ultimate objective. Every kind of progress is a two-edged sword. It is necessary if man is to grow as a human being; yet it can also enslave him, if he comes to regard it as the supreme good and cannot look beyond it. When this happens, men harden their hearts, shut out others from their minds and gather together solely for reasons of self-interest rather than out of friendship; dissension and disunity follow soon after. Thus the exclusive pursuit of material possessions prevents man's growth as a human being and stands in opposition to his true grandeur. Avarice, in individuals and in nations, is the most obvious form of stultified moral development." *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI (1967): http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

there is a clear connection between wisdom and movement (*in* and *venire* coming – to come upon, find, discover). The book of Proverbs invites us to be prudent in the time of crisis: Let our lips be bound with wisdom. Since understanding is a matter of situating ourselves always differently in regard to ourselves and the subject matter, we can speak of a dialectical movement of understanding: The same is always understood differently (we always understand differently, if we understand at all, *wir verstehen immer anders wenn wir überhaupt verstehen*).⁵ The primary task of educating ourselves is to learn to apply to our life what discloses itself to us from experiences which awaken our questions. The hermeneutics of education reminds us that what is at stake in the event of education (*das Ereignis der Bildung*) is the formation of persons through an encounter with the subject-matter.⁶

In repeating Leibniz's question, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"⁷ Heidegger recaptures the very meaning of philosophy as the art of asking questions. The culture of questioning expresses our deep wonderment, *θαυμάζειν*: "Philosophizing [...] is extra-ordinary questioning about the extra-ordinary."⁸ It is exactly through our wonder (*διὰ τὸ θαυμάζειν*) that we begin to philosophize.⁹ However, wondering, while opening our eyes (*Entbergung*, unconcealment), also plunges us into the dark (*Verbergung*, concealment). To philosophize, then, means to ask questions over the whole breadth of what it puts into question:

We seek to win back intact the naming force of language and words; for words and language are not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse. In the word, in language, things first come to be and are. For this reason, too, the misuse of language in mere idle talk, in slogans and phrases, destroys our genuine connection to things.¹⁰

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000), 296. Cf. Andrzej Wierciński, *Existentia Hermeneutica: Understanding as the Mode of Being in the World* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019).

⁶ The event of education cannot be generated. It eludes all will to educate (*Bildungswille*). Education cannot be reduced to the techniques of teaching and learning that should bring about an educated human being who acts responsibly as a human person.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, transl. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1.

⁸ Heidegger, *Introduction*, 14.

⁹ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b. The full text is available from the *Perseus Project* in both Greek and English: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.+Theaet.+155d&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0171>; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0051%3ABook%3D1%3Asection%3D982b>

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Introduction*, 15.

Living in times of crisis, we receive an unprecedented chance to rethink ourselves as lingual beings and seriously address the matter of our responsibility to respond to “what calls for thinking.”¹¹ This unprecedented global emergency brutally unveils the shortcomings of our (self) understanding and the futile hope placed in philosophy:

Philosophy never makes things easier, but only more difficult. And it does so not just incidentally, not just because its manner of communication seems strange or even deranged to everyday understanding. The burdening of historical Dasein, and thereby at bottom of Being itself, is rather the genuine sense of what philosophy can achieve. Burdening gives back to things, to beings, their weight (Being). And why? Because burdening is one of the essential and fundamental conditions for the genesis of everything great, among which we include above all else the fate of a historical people and its works. But fate is there only where a true knowing about things rules over Dasein. And the avenues and views of such a knowing are opened up by philosophy.¹²

Being reminded of the urgency of thinking, we are called to take seriously the imperative of constant vigilance and discernment. We might need a certain retreat from the world and from our former form of life.¹³ For some of us, the imposed lockdowns were an unexpected and sometimes unwelcomed opportunity to rethink our lives and to develop a phronetic philosophy of discernment.¹⁴ Maybe the healing we need comes from opening toward the other, not necessarily infected or sick, person. We are confronted with questions regarding the kind of healing we need, and wish for ourselves. We can see the Coronavirus crisis as a propitious event, which can hold out hope for something new to emerge. The awaiting of the new cannot be separated from a preceding and radical conversion.¹⁵

Speaking of seeing, we realize how much needs to, and can be, done with regard to sensitizing our capability of seeing things. Engaging

¹¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, “What Calls for Thinking?” in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed., David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 369–391.

¹² Heidegger, *Introduction*, 12.

¹³ Cf. William W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Betrachtungen zum ignatianischen Exerzitienbuch* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1965), Eng. *Spiritual Exercises*, transl. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). See also Karlheinz Ruhstorfer, *Das Prinzip ignatianischen Denkens: Zum geschichtlichen Ort der “Geistlichen Übungen” des Ignatius von Loyola* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1998).

¹⁵ Cf. Andrzej Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education: Exploring and Experiencing the Unpredictability of Education* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019), especially “Hermeneutic Commitment to Thinking,” 7–20.

Michelangelo Caravaggio's *Cena di Emmaus (Supper at Emmaus)* from 1601 enables us to capture the essence of Caravaggio's hermeneutics: The joy of a human being comes from situating the Other (Christ) in the center of human life.



Michelangelo Caravaggio, *Cena di Emmaus (Supper at Emmaus)*, 1601, public domain.

The disciples who were on the way to Emmaus with the resurrected Christ and shared with him the disappointments of the recent days realized at the dinner table that the only way to understand themselves and what is happening in their lives, is to decentralize from themselves and place Jesus at the center. The events on the way to Emmaus, and the dinner itself, point to the centrality of conversation which, as an embodied experience, is transforming the life of the disciples by conforming it to the likeness of Jesus. Walking to Emmaus becomes a journey of joy, which is the characteristic journey of a disciple: To bear witness to the joy. This is the participation in the dynamism of love, the ἐνέργεια, which encompasses the transition in the disciple according to the divine understanding of progress. This joy is rooted, not in the thinking of thinking (νοήσεως νόησις) as the ultimate origin of everything, but in the incarnated love ready for the highest sacrifice (i.e., the sacrificing of one's life), by refusing to make use of divine power in order to make this sacrifice unnecessary.

Caravaggio's clarity of representation is astonishing in its immediacy and simplicity. However, this simplicity is achieved through the virtuosity of painting this remarkable tension by the simple means of

light and shadow. It is precisely the *chiaroscuro*, which brings forth the powerful drama of the event. The invitation to an apparent stranger to share a meal with the two disciples leads to the disclosure of the identity of the guest. The intimate gesture of breaking the bread opens up the eyes of the disciples. Caravaggio proves his artistic genius by capturing the essential incommunicability of the event: By freezing the *dramatis personae* in their extraordinary and exceptional amazement, we are informed of the miraculous exchange, and not just invited but beckoned to participate in this divine transformation. There is a huge difference in the expression of the faces. The disciples look as if arrested by what is happening. Christ's face spreads peace, and the face of the innkeeper exhibits the distance of a mere observer. Caravaggio knows how to paint, achieving the suspension of the division line between what is real and what is painted. He invites the viewer to participate actively in what is happening. Thus, his painting is not capturing an event from the past but can and needs to be seen from the perspective of the viewer's historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). The genius of the painter and the genius of the viewer meet while participating in the transformation of the historical event into the present happening, right before our very eyes (*Zusammengehören von Verstehen und Geschehen*). It is a question of aesthetic experience (*Erfahrung*) in which the subjectivity of the viewer is overcome and drawn into an occurrence (*Geschehen*) of meaning.¹⁶

The rhythm of life during pandemics invites recollection (*Besinnung*) and a return to the subjects and themes that are present in our life. We can look at our life as we look at Caravaggio's paintings, seeing in them the revolutionary power that was transforming our understanding of painting. This transformation is a formation of our understanding, which includes both destruction and restoration. Caravaggio offers us new and different insights into the life of Jesus's disciples. In times of crisis, the ability of looking at one's life from different perspectives can be a source of inspiration but also painful discoveries of aspects that remain covered up. All this is happening because dining has the powerful ability and charm of bringing people together and of leaving enough free space for allowing the unpredicted and unexpected to occur. The way to Emmaus and the supper disclose something extremely powerful about the art of being human, not keeping to what is old, just to dwell upon it and enjoying the old, but in order to prepare for the encounter

¹⁶ "The apparently thetic beginning of interpretation is, in fact, a response; and the sense of an interpretation is determined, like every response, by the question asked. Thus the dialectic of question and answer always precedes the dialectic of interpretation. It is what determines understanding as an event." (*Das Verstehen ist bestimmt als ein Geschehen*). Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 467.

with the new. In the end, this is the meaning of experience: To use the wisdom gained from the encounter with the old to prepare for the new. As Gadamer reminds us,

The perfection that we call “being experienced” does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.¹⁷

Rediscovering and Revaluating the Urgency of Thinking in the Time of Crisis is an invitation to take seriously the task of thinking and to challenge the thoughtlessness (*Gedankenlosigkeit*) of our times, to which we have become accustomed. The task of thinking is not meant to be a cure for any present or future emergencies but empowers us to face what calls for thinking. Our strength does not come from avoiding the crisis but from stepping into the current difficulty with an awareness of the urgency of making decisions. In our weakness we discover that our openness to transcendence is not a mere and fearful search for moving beyond ourselves, but a true discovery of the power of weakness. To understand this power, and to experience the sufficiency of grace (2 Cor 12: 9) is the urgent task for thinking in the time of crisis.

This collection of papers presents our (re)action to the crisis. It demonstrates how we respond to what is happening by urgently thinking what is necessary. It expresses the courage of conviction, i.e., that this response is a matter of our radical responsibility, which nobody can take for us. This is the opportune time to reconsider our way of being in the world. Now is the right, critical, and opportune time, *καιρός*, of the unprecedented opportunity to interpret anew what it means to be a human being with others and not only human beings (*Mitsein*) in the world. This propitious time calls us for a passionate search for (self)understanding and reminds us of the indispensability of responding to the permanent task of interpretation.¹⁸ Interpreting our ways of dealing with the pandemic helps us to unearth and rediscover the meaning of any difficult

¹⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 350.

¹⁸ Cf. Andrzej Wierciński, “Hermeneutics and the Indirect Path to Understanding,” in: *The Task of Interpretation: Hermeneutics, Psychoanalysis, and Literary Studies*, ed. Edward Fiała, Dariusz Skórczewski, and Andrzej Wierciński (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2009), 11–44.

experience, which, in turn, prompts us to form and transform our life radically.

The authors of this issue join me in thanking the Editors of *Ruch Filozoficzny* for their generous invitation to share our insights on the urgency of thinking in the time of crisis. All the contributors address what they recognize as their personal call. Similarly as in the Caravaggio painting, we do not exist behind the canvas. We enter into the story depicted by the painter and undergo the whole range of experiences that were lived out by the characters portrayed. Working on what needs to be dealt with in our personal and academic life, we bring together everything that matters to us, out into our own common space, and are grateful for the possibility of the experience of sharing this with the world. Recognizing that it remains almost impossible to identify an other outside of our own world, we do not want to domesticate the other, but encourage facing life as it shows itself to us in between familiarity and strangeness. This is the time for conversion. We converse about the urgency of conversion. This is the time of times.

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