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The COVID-19 pandemic: an economic disaster, a philosophical challenge
A philosophical essay

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This essay is dedicated to my mother, who died on the 24th of July 2022.

On her day of death, we both discussed the consequences of the COVID-19 for humanity and its metaphysical implications. This essay is in part the result of this discussion.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies in the years 2020 and 2021 have exerted economic, social, and psychic implications for most people. The reception by social scientists is almost exclusively a negative one; in this essay, a contrasting, more positive perspective is developed, based on the philosophy of Aristotelian Ethics. The idea is developed that this coronavirus pandemic interrupts and distorts the work-consumption-treadmill, enabling people to live out those talents and capabilities that make people human, lifting them beyond the stage of an animal with only basic needs. This societal development continues under the influence of the energy crisis and the rising inflation in the year 2022.

Keywords: COVID-19, happiness, treadmill, philosophy, ethics, capability, Aristotle

COVID-19: An economic disaster, a philosophical challenge

Introduction

The years 2020 and 2021 brought about many changes in all realms of people's lives – societal transformations that have been accelerated and fostered by the disease COVID-19 and the pandemic it created, and the corresponding policy responses to it. To many of us these transformations appeared as a threat, endangering the way of life we had been used to living before, both at the societal level and the individual level. This negative perspective on these changes has been shaped by experts of social sciences, economics and psychology. In this essay, this negative perspective will be challenged by an alternative, more positive interpretation: a philosophical viewpoint on these changes.

The negative consequences of the COVID–19 pandemic

In particular, the following observations gave rise to the development of this rather negative perspective on the consequences of COVID–19 pandemic and of the lockdown policies to combat the disease: First, these policies led to increased unemployment among employees, particularly in the service sector and among freelancers – about 400 million full-time jobs worldwide were lost due to the pandemic (e.g., McKeever, 2020). It also led to reduced working hours in the classical productions sector (in countries where the government paid subsidies to the employers to keep employees in the pandemic-affected sectors in employment). The lockdown policies resulted in the shutting down of shops in cities, in the reduction of public transport facilities, in the temporary closing down of schools and kindergartens – sectors in which physical contact takes place on a regular basis. These policies also forced a large number of employees and freelancers to work from home (so-called 'home office') and resulted in the rise of homeschooling and other forms of online teaching. In addition, international trade linkages suffered by the distortion of transportation routes, transnational supply chains and the closing down of harbors and airports (e.g., Strumpf, 2020). Some governments even illegally confiscated medical products destined for export at the airport, just a few seconds prior to departure (as happened in both USA and China). In consequence, transnational export and import of consumption goods, intermediary goods and resources became an extraordinarily difficult enterprise. A famous example was the global computer chip crisis, the export of which was partly temporarily restricted by national governments or the production of which suffered from the shortage of intermediary goods: Urban legend says that German car producers bought up whole production lines of high-end washing machines in order to reuse the built-in chips for their cars. The automotive sector went into crisis in both Great Britain, Germany, and USA during the pandemic (e.g., Wikipedia, 2022); for example, according to Wayland (2020) sales in the USA declined by 40%. Overall, the economies of the first and second world shrank substantially (as measured by GDP) – the economy of the EU itself by 6% to 8% in 2020 alone, and in the first quarter

of 2020 by 11% (e.g., EIB, 2021): the pandemic is said to have caused the second largest global recession in recent times (Kaplan and McFall-Johnsen, 2020). An overview of these macroeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is best given in a well-investigated article “Economic impact of the COVID-10 pandemic” published on Wikipedia that cites more than 300 sources to support their claims (see Wikipedia, 2022).

These negative consequences occurred not only at the level of macroeconomy, but affected also, and the more, each of us individually, young and old, working and non-working, man and woman likewise. About one third of the global population were in some kind of lockdown during the years 2020–2021, varying in duration, starting points and ending points (e.g., Kaplan and McFall-Johnsen, 2020), which strongly affected their daily lives. For example, home office, homeschooling, and the closing down of leisure facilities made families spend more time together with lesser opportunity to escape to outdoor activities (be it to work, school, gym, shopping centers, etc.); the result was an increased number of (recorded) domestic violence and marital quarrels. The closing down of shops in the city centers reduced substantially opportunities for young people to spend their leisure time shopping – a much-loved self-esteem bolstering activity in our consumer society –; instead, the volumes of sales over the internet increased substantially. The closing down of institutions of culture (museums, theaters, movie theaters) and restaurants reduced the opportunities to have social contacts outside the realm of family. Even on the job, being compelled to work from home brought about an unprecedented experience of loneliness for many employees. To many, the worst experience during the lock-down period was that lockdown-induced unemployment and reduced working hours let the financial resources shrivel for the affected, causing financial stress for themselves, for their partners and for their families.

The alternative, more positive perspective of philosophy

However, this rather negative evaluation, rather shaped by the viewpoint of social scientists, can be complemented or even substituted by a more positive interpretation of these lockdown-induced constraints when taking on the perspective of a philosopher. For example, regarding the difficulties in maintaining social contacts: the negative aspects of having fewer social contacts in general, – it can be replaced by the positive aspect of re-focusing on a few specific social contacts instead, that implies a focus on true friendships instead of one on the myriad of so-so acquaintanceships with colleagues and other contemporaries. Another example, this time regarding constraints on indoor sports activities: this negative aspect of closed recreation centers and sport studios, it can be replaced by the positive aspect of carrying out sports activities outdoors in place of indoors, in the nature, in plain fresh air, – sports activities such as biking, walking, jogging, inline skating. Another example, regarding family life: in place of focusing on the few additional cases of domestic conflicts one may consider instead the fostering of family ties in general, by family members simply spending more time together.

From a metaphysical-philosophical perspective, the most important positive development induced by the lockdown policies is the distortion of the work-consumption-treadmill. Based on the idea of a decreasing marginal utility of consumption, the additional happiness achieved by consuming more (more goods or more expensive goods) gets smaller the higher the starting level of consumption is. For this reason, people get trapped in the work-consumption-treadmill – and most people in consumer societies are – as they keep trying to achieve higher levels of happiness by continuously increasing their consumption, that is by continuously increasing their income (through working harder or more), which finances their expenses. However, because of the decreasing marginal utility of income (consumption) full satisfaction can never be achieved. This phenomenon is also called the Easterlin-paradoxon, the existence of which can be empirically demonstrated by comparing cross-national data on per capita income and national averages of happiness (Easterlin, 1974). The work-consumption-treadmill or so-called hedonistic treadmill of modern consumer societies leads to self-exploitation of workers at the expense of their health and their family life.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic-social lockdowns distorted this work-consumption-treadmill in two ways: First, it reduced the amount of money available for buying consumption goods and lowered the daily consumption levels of many people. Second, it lessened the number of working hours for freelancers, for the newly unemployed, and for those working on short time. Through these means the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity of dishabituation, of forced withdrawal – like a former drug addict people had to learn to consume less of the drug ‘consumption’. The closing down of shops in the cities equally helped to reduce consumption and also to avoid developing feelings of deprivation and alienation when passing by these shops, without having the financial means to buy something; the lesser social contacts provided less opportunity for social and status comparisons, based on observed consumer behavior.

My claim as philosopher is that, overall, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns provided an opportunity to start living a better life than before, that is to live a good life as a true human. How can we dare to have such a positive view on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies?

To the Greek philosopher Aristotle, leading a good life means living out the potential a human life entails – which goes far beyond consuming and earning money only: a good life and a happy life consists in the actualization of the human potentials – in particular, in the actualization of those potentials that make humans distinct from plants and animals. For a further understanding of what makes us human, one may take a look at the structure of the human soul according to Aristotle, as described in his path-breaking book *The Nicomachean Ethics*, which consists of 10 rather self-contained chapters; the human soul is explained at the end of the first two chapters (chapters 1 and 2). According to Aristotle, the human soul consists of three parts: The vegetative part, the animal part (as I like to call it), and the logical part. Each part relates to specific abilities and potentials that can be brought to actualization in the real world. The vegetative part (*to phytikon*) is concerned about growing, feeding and caring for the body; for its actualization food, shelter, clothes, a bath, etc. is required. The animal part (*to orektikon*) relates to thriving, urges, desires, and needs – it relates to what

drives a person or an animal to do something, to become active, to get engaged in action. The animal part also relates to emotions, perception with the senses, and physical movement (*pathos*, *aisthesis*, and *kinesis*). In consequence, a person who lives out the vegetative and animal parts of her soul engages in activities of consuming food, shopping clothes, going to the gym, spending money on HealthCare, – expressed differently, most people trapped in a work-consumption- treadmill actualize only the two lowest parts of the human soul, living a life more similar to that of an animal rather than to that of a true human. In classical times, such a life was considered the life of a slave, meeting only the basic needs of a human life.

The part of the human soul that separates us humans from animals is the so-called logical part (*to logon echon*) which Aristotle describes in book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This part relates to prudence, that is the ability to reason, to look at the pros and cons of an action, to evaluate consequences. It also relates to activities of the pure intellect such as doing science as well as using one's intuition, which Aristotle considered necessary for achieving wisdom. Prudence is needed for developing worthy goals, choosing the right means, making the right decisions. In other words, prudence is needed for ethical acting – which can take place in relations to other person's only, that is within society, not in solitude. Ethical actions are always political actions – they are in the field of politics itself, in the field of family life, all in the fields of friendships, that is among friends.

Living a good life means living out your potentials

From this it follows that a truly human life is either a contemplative or an ethically active life – as it is the logical part of the soul which dominates here, that part which makes humans human and which makes us humans differ from animals. In other words, to Aristotle to be human means to use the human logic – one's prudence or one's intellect. Using that logical part of the human soul is the function of man in this world – it is the *ergon* of humans, their specific task and obligation, but at the same time it is also what will bring them true joy and fulfillment, that is true satisfaction with their lives. In consequence, a happy and fulfilled life can be achieved through the following activities: Working as scientist, doing philosophy, worshipping and meditating, doing fine arts, engaging in cultural activities, or, alternatively, by practicing ethics – that is by doing politics, caring for friends and family, doing social work, working for the community. If one exercises that part of the soul where her specific talent lies by doing things for which she has that talent for she will experience pleasure: the search for pleasure, as laid out by Aristotle in book 10 of the *Nicomachean ethics*, will lead everybody to do what she is meant to do, according to the structure of her individual soul. Hence, true pleasure is not found in consuming goods and comparing social status (as economic theory suggests), but in 'doing your own thing', that is in living out your creative, intellectual, or ethical potential(s).

Returning to the main argument of the paper, the lockdown that followed the COVID-19 pandemic gave us the opportunity to set a new focus on how we should live our lives to achieve true happiness: It had and still has the potential of freeing us from the treadmill of earning money to consume more and more – a hedonic treadmill which gives us the illusion

of moving forward at the physical level while, in reality, it disguises our stagnation in life at a psychic level: First of all, many persons experienced a reduction in income through unemployment or a reduced working hours because of lower levels of output in the industry – such persons were forced through their shrinking earnings to lower their levels of consumption. Second and in addition, even those persons who did not experience a decline in income through unemployment or the like were hampered in spending their money on consumption goods: the lockdowns took away many spending opportunities by closing down shops in city centers and similar locations in general: since shops, restaurants, cinemas, shopping centers, had all been closed down, seven persons with an unaffected level of income were forced into abstention of (luxury) consumption goods.

The COVID-19 pandemic as dehabitation training

Obviously, the positive aspect of the COVID-19 outbreaks and the lockdowns that followed lies in its potential dehabitation and detoxication effects: Potentially, through this substantial change in lifestyle, it may have become apparent to consumers that consuming goods for its own sake – more goods, more expensive goods, more exclusive goods – does not provide true happiness. Instead, the lockdown policy brought about a new awareness of the true value of some consumption goods, e.g. of leisure time activities, the unrestricted access to which had been taken for granted in pre-COVID-19 times: for example, experiencing arts in the museums and going to the cinema, dining out in restaurant, having a good coffee in the bakery in the morning or having a beer in a bar watching the sunset – the true pleasures of rather simple enjoyments and the contribution to one's happiness of those little liberties in life, which we had all considered as almost natural part of a modern life. In other words, the lockdowns have taught us to appreciate the existence of leisure-time-related consumption goods (culture, restaurants, etc.), that is to consume these goods not any more on a daily basis but less often, but then with a higher degree of awareness, making their consumption a 'special event' in life, leading to greater enjoyment and thus happiness.

Another example for this detoxication effect is that the lockdown policies forced everybody to draw a line between simple acquaintanceships and true friendships, and it also showed us the importance of family life for our well-being. According to Aristotle, spending time with friends and family is part of living a politically active life, with the opportunity of leading an ethically good life and, as such, providing one way to find satisfaction in life. The (shockingly unexpected) strictness of the policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, made many of us remember that one should always keep track of politics and keep controlling the actions of politicians – the pandemic turned many of us into 'political' beings again, it turned as again into good citizens, practicing politics through engaging in the political debate on the political course society should take. The lockdown also brought about a new respect for nature: nature recovered substantially through reduced air traffic, ship traffic, car traffic, less tourism, and less travel – instead, people started to experience nature in news ways, closer, more intimate, e.g., through doing sports in nature, living out their family lives in nature, meeting friends in nature (replacing clubs and restaurants), partying

sitting on benches ‘en plain air’ in nature. Such deep experiencing of nature, such immersion into nature can be viewed as a form of meditation and, as such, also as a way to exercise the logical part of the human soul.

From this Aristotelian perspective on the lockdown, even working from home loses its threatening character: working in the home office, in isolation from your colleagues at work, is a perfect test to see whether or not your money-earning job is in congruence with your own individual talents and potentials – only in this case one will experience joy and pleasure with the job one is doing. However, in the second case, if one is not, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a great opportunity of finding out if one should or should not change one's occupation. According to Aristotle, feeling pleasure with what one is doing (as occupation or as daily activity in general) ensures mastery and true enjoyment that helps develop the good aspects of one's soul.

Central to having a good life is leading an ethically good life. What we have learned so far is that a life consisting of pure consumption and working for financing it does not satisfy the criteria of an ethically good life – consuming goods is an activity that focuses on one's own needs and necessities only, neglecting the needs of other members of society. Indeed, it was Adam Smith's concept of the so-called invisible hand which he describes in his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that fostered the idea that when making decisions to buy (to consume) it was the best for society, the well-being of society and the individuals living therein, NOT to consider the needs of others in business decision-making. In the specific case of a sales transaction, one should not consider the needs of the vendor or salesperson. This consideration shows that well-being as thought of by Adam Smith and well-being as defined by Aristotle are two completely distinct concepts: while A. Smith defines a good life by the level of satisfaction achieved through consumption (based on Jeremy Bentham's idea of seeking pleasures and avoiding pain during one's lifetime); to Aristotle true well-being is found when a person achieves living out her potentials and talents, that rest in her non-animal part of her soul, waiting for their unfolding into reality, waiting for their evolution into the sphere of material life.

Today, in summer 2022, the pandemic seems to be far away. Infection rates are on the decline, as is the COVID-19-induced death toll. Most of the restrictions on people's lives have been lifted: society has returned to ordinary work and schooling; universities have been re-opened – but has life returned to some pre-COVID-19 normality? Not at all – fortunately! The two-year-lasting dehabitation from consumption has put us on an alternate consumption path, creating alternate patterns of behavior, having caused some substantial changes in people's behavior: For example, many people have reduced the number of superficial social contacts, instead focusing on true friends. People are going out less, are consuming less just for pleasure – there are no overcrowded shops with giggling tweens any more. People are less eager to make contact with strangers, keeping some safe distance, avoiding physical contact. The industry has also reacted by repeating designs and production lines of the previous season. Regarding the means of transportation, the demand for bicycles has jumped to an unprecedented high so that traders are talking of having one of the best profitable years in

which they do business; in contrast, the demand for classical cars is on the decline – the times of cars serving as status symbol, as metaphor of technological progress and of economic prosperity, seem to have gone since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ongoing crises keep transforming our societies

This process of transformation is being continued and enforced by the Ukrainian-Russian conflict that started in late spring 2022, just when people thought that they had finally overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. The war in the Ukraine generated a political response by the EU to the Russian invasion: a ban on Russian imports and a ban on exports to Russia. In consequence, an energy crisis emerged, just as the inflows of Russian gas and coal were put to a total stop. Through the effects of substitution the price of fuel equally rose to a new historical high, while the missing inflow of coal from Russia made the use of electricity to run machinery in households and industry substantially more expensive. Overall, all forms of energy production and resources for energy generation became negatively affected. Starkly rising prices of energy imply a tendency for inflation: energy makes up the largest part of production costs in capital-intensive (automated) production – and in industrialized countries even artisan shops work relatively capital-intensive as compared to the simple production technology in developing countries. Rising prices also cause higher transportation costs, and increasing transportation costs imply higher costs at all stages of the production chain, and hence for the production of goods in general. Expressed differently: higher prices of energy make most consumption goods substantially more expensive, be it products of daily use or be it luxury goods.

To put simply, higher energy prices exert a devaluation effect on people's income, even though on paper their income may have stayed the same or even show rising numbers: higher energy prices lower everybody's purchasing power. The prices of fresh vegetables and other food items have risen by 20% to 30% compared to the price level one year ago. Again, the war between Russia and the Ukraine proved to be another shock to our current economic and political system (with a political response enlarging this shock to an out-of-system event), so that it becomes difficult if not impossible to maintain the pre-war (and pre-Corona) level of consumption. If people tried to return to a pre-COVID-19 'normality' after the occurrence of the much less deadly coronavirus variant Omikron, the war in the Ukraine made such attempts to return to such previous patterns and attitudes completely obsolete. It is predicted for the coming winter that the price level will continue to rise, causing an even starker change in people's consumption patterns: Possibly, some people must as much as possible keep hold of their money to be able to pay for the heating, and some people will start using electric appliances less often. While this development appears to be rather negative to those affected, such a shock provides, again, implicitly another opportunity of escaping the consumption-work-treadmill, by forcing us to get used to lower levels of consumption. The devaluation of money coupled with higher energy prices also implies that leisure time activities become relatively more expensive (in real terms) – again, this systemic shock teaches us to appreciate more and to experience more intensively certain activities which we cannot afford any more

to carry out on a daily basis, as we might have been used to before the war and before the COVID-19-crisis.

Finally, the rising costs of energy and transportation distorts international trade linkages in a similar way compared to what the COVID-19-induced lockdowns did, when import and export became simply forbidden or strongly restricted by state legislation. While the various lockdowns since 2020 brought some international trade roads to a simple standstill, leading to great difficulties to re-start them again after two years of shrinking international trade volume, nowadays, in mid-2022, the rising costs of transportation exert an additional and even more transforming effect: they destroy the basis of cross-national production chains. Global supply chains (e.g., the well-known example of a T-shirt made from cotton from USA, woven in India, sewed in Vietnam, sold in Germany) need very low transportation costs in order to maintain their profitability – interestingly, the classical models of international trade (e.g., the Heckscher-Ohlin model, the Ricardo model, etc.), all of them abstract from the costs of transportation, setting them at a level of zero. However, in reality, increased transportation costs will lead to a regionalization of a formerly globalized world economy – the splitting up into trade blocs, as it has already been predicted by economist Paul Krugman in the 1990ies (see Krugman, 1991). From a positive perspective, people will consume more regional products and possibly become more aware of the ecological footprints these internationally traded and globally produced goods entail. Potentially and hopefully, people will start buying less imported goods (as their prices increase overproportionally compared to regionally traded and produced goods), preferring more locally produced ones. By this change in behavior, people will enter a positive cycle of increasing the demand for locally produced products, while at the same time reshaping the global economy by breaking it up into regional trade blocs. And in case people do consume imported goods from far-away countries (e.g., a pineapple), they will do so on rare occasions only and then with some respect for the high value of this special good, enjoying the rareness of such an event.

Conclusion

To me as philosopher it seems that each of the three events that shaped our world since 2020 – the lockdowns to combat the COVID-19 disease, the Ukrainian-Russian violent conflict that produced an energy crisis, and the increasingly accelerating inflation – each of it is meant to set us all on a new path of how to live our lives: one the one hand, a path of enjoying our lives through a deliberate and conscious consumption in place of some binge consumption, consuming without limits until breakdown; on the other hand, our future life is not a life without consuming ‘luxury goods’ or a life of being deprived of private property or personal belongings as envisioned by early communists or even by the great Greek philosopher Plato in his classical utopian writing *Politeia* (engl., *The Republic*). This post-industrial, Aquarius age-type of conscious consumption is not shaped by some needs and desires (as triggered by the animal part of our soul) that translate directly into acting without prior reflection; instead, such conscious consumption is the result of a cognitively transformed motivation, putting our

desire to consume into the context of our well-being through prioritizing the activation of those potentials and talents that make us all truly human.

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