

# How philosophy can help to address the pandemic?

## ¿Cómo puede la Filosofía ayudar a afrontar la pandemia?

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**Editor's note:** This article is an update and correction of the article by the same author: *The role of philosophy in the pandemic era*, published in volume 6, number 2 of the Bioethics UPdate journal, with DOI: 10.1016/j.bioet.2020.08.001. In that article, the author's name appeared as G. Lourdes Velázquez. However, a mistake was made in her name, the initial G. is not correct and could not be corrected in the article. By mutual agreement between the author and the editor of this journal, we proceed to reproduce the article, enriched with substantial additions and with the corrected authorship.

### Abstract

*It would seem that philosophy, which is concerned with general matters, should not be concerned with pandemics which are a fact. In reality, it has all the credentials to analyze the pandemic both on the epistemological and on the existential register. Philosophy does not offer tools for solving practical problems but looks for a sense of concrete situations through a rational reflection. In the present case, this sense focuses on: 1. Critical thinking; 2. Human fragility; 3. Human impotence; 4. Limited efficiency of technoscience; 5. Rediscovery of common good and human solidarity; and 6. The incumbent presence of death. The results of this reflection can point out responsibilities of the political power and produce hostility against philosophers and the effort of silencing their voice, reminding us of the example of Socrates.*

**Key words:** Pandemic. Philosophy. COVID-19. Vulnerability. Critical thinking.

### Resumen

*Parecería que la filosofía, que se ocupa de asuntos generales, no debería preocuparse de la pandemia, que es un hecho concreto. En realidad tiene todas las credenciales para analizarla tanto del punto de vista epistemológico como existencial. La filosofía no nos ofrece herramientas para la resolución de problemas prácticos, pero busca dar un sentido a las situaciones concretas por medio de una reflexión racional. En el caso que nos ocupa este sentido se centra en: (a) el pensamiento crítico; (b) la fragilidad humana; (c) la impoten-*

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*cia humana; (d) la eficiencia limitada de la tecnociencia; (e) el redescubrimiento del bien común y la solidaridad humana, y (f) la presencia predominante de la muerte. Los resultados de estas reflexiones pueden evidenciar responsabilidades del poder político y producir hostilidad contra los filósofos y el esfuerzo de silenciar su voz, recordándonos entre otros el ejemplo de Sócrates.*

**Palabras clave:** Pandemia. Filosofía. COVID-19. Vulnerabilidad. Pensamiento crítico.

## Introduction

*"Sometimes thoughts arions, and some become epidemics"*  
Wallace Stevens American poet 1879-1955

Let us start from this thought of Blaise Pascal (a philosopher, mathematician, and scientist of the seventeenth century), taken from his *Pensées*, which seems to be written for our time: "When I have occasionally set myself to consider the different distractions of men, the pains and perils to which they expose themselves at court or in war, whence arise so many quarrels, passions, bold and often bad ventures, etc., I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber. A man who has enough to live on, if he knew how to stay with pleasure at home, would not leave it to go to sea or to besiege a town. A commission in the army would not be bought so dearly, but that it is found insufferable not to budge from the town; and men only seek conversation and entering games, because they cannot remain with pleasure at home"<sup>2</sup>.

These words seem to have been written yesterday and not centuries ago. Today, too, we find it hard to stay in our home, to respect the quarantine rules that are fundamental as they represent the main defense against the spread of infection. Why do we not bear to be alone? Why does even the happiest man in the world constantly try to be busy, do many things, have an agenda full of appointments? Because, when we stop and reflect on ourselves, we see clearly what Pascal calls human misery, constitutive of our condition. This is why staying at home, being isolated, is difficult: when we are alone with ourselves we are immediately confronted with our misery, our weakness as human beings. Nevertheless, by returning seriously to ourselves, we not only discover our fragility and misery, but also our dignity and our greatness<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, this time of loneliness and social isolation becomes precious because it also offers us the opportunity to examine ourselves, to look at ourselves for what we really are, beyond our masks and what we want to show around us, and can help us. To be a little more true, at least with us. All this leads one to think that this social isolation, which we find hard to get used to, has a sense, has a profound value, has a very high meaning. It cannot be seen only as a sacrifice to which we must grudgingly bow out of fear of a sanction; it is also something profoundly sensible. It makes sense first of all for ourselves, because it gives us the opportunity to examine our self and look at ourselves in a more realistic and profound way, for what we are and not for what we do, for appear or try to appear. But this time, also makes sense to strengthen our bonds with others. The paradox is this: by being isolated we strengthen bonds with others. By remaining isolated we protect not only ourselves but also others, especially the most vulnerable, weak and defenseless people: in some way we take care of them, and we become their guardians. This is why philosophy is important now: it can help us understand the meaning and value of what we are called to by the urgencies of our time<sup>3</sup>.

## Analogy

When thinking about COVID-19 and pandemic, should we accept the idea of moving in a strictly specialized field, that is, entrusted solely to medical knowledge, to which all other areas of knowledge are subordinate? Or is it possible to imagine a relationship between philosophy and pandemic, between thought and COVID?

Thinking about the pandemic? The very question takes us fully into the field of philosophy. We can think of the pandemic because we are alive. “*cogito ergo sum*” “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes)<sup>4</sup>. Being alive, we suffer the pandemic that threatens our existence and the very possibility of thinking about it. Although, it must be said, we do not all suffer the pandemic in the same way. Is it possible to find an analogy between the spread of the virus and the spread of philosophical ideas? It is certainly possible: philosophy, for example, is similar to the virus in that it pushes us to set priorities and make us aware of our finiteness, but also in that it forces us to pose new problems. It is impossible to live without ideas, not because we have or stop *having ideas*, but because the ideas are *having us*. This happens because reality itself imposes certain ideas on us, whether we like it or not. In fact, even a simple virus can mobilize more ideas than a philosophy treatise.

There are deeper reasons for this analogy and the first is that both are invisible and are transmitted from one person to another. Philosophy is transmitted through ideas most of the time in an oral form, and also viruses, such as COVID-19, are transmitted through very small drops of saliva that come out of the mouth, while their diffusion is so rapid that even in the case of ideas it is used to say that they have become “viral.” The virus, entering the body, acts as a dangerous agent that puts our health at risk. Philosophy does not enter the body but into the mind, yet certain philosophical ideas can also be considered a threat to man, as happened during some historical occasions: Socrates was put to death, because his ideas were considered as a threat to the power structures of the time<sup>5</sup>. The same thing happened with Spinoza<sup>6,7</sup>, whose ideas led to excommunication from his congregation and social community. Jean Paul Sartre’s philosophy was also considered a danger, so much so that in Great Britain his play *The closed door* was prohibited, as well as in the Soviet Union his play *The dirty hands*, while Pope Pius XII put all his works in the Index of prohibited books; Gabriel Marcel said that Sartre’s thought corrupted the young people<sup>8</sup>, repeating the accusation formulated against Socrates at his time. These three examples alone are enough to mention philosophers whose thinking represented a public threat to many, just like viruses. In this way the philosopher appears (as well as the virus) an “*epidemos*” in the true Greek sense of the word, that is, someone who is in the “*demos*,” who circulates among people of a certain community and endangers their lives. This is why philosophy and viruses, if taken in isolation, when they spread in societies can provoke and determine profound changes in mentality, when they recall previously neglected needs and awareness and in this way they can profoundly influence the course of history, for better or for worse.

## What is philosophy for?

Let us leave the analogy aside and ask if philosophy can help us manage this time of apprehension and quarantine, if it can help us rediscover a different time and a different relationship with ourselves and with others in this exceptional condition. Does it make sense that philosophy is being

practiced, discussed and even disseminated at such a dramatic time? Ourselves what philosophers are doing during the current pandemic. The frustration of feeling useless is a considerable and it is difficult to hide it. We remain at home to write our own articles, to read, to give classes and webinars, but we would like to do more while the world sinks.

What is the real good? Health or freedom? The body or the spirit? The healthy body or the free body? Choices must be made. The state of exception can be intense and become a moment of suspension, of freezing the situation, when too many conflicting rights (health, freedom of movement, study, work, faith, and freedom of worship) create a decision paralysis and then health appears the first priority. A suspension, however, that is at the same time a choice. Because without health everything else remains groundless. This is a key criterion to make the choice, though it can certainly be overturned. But at what price? What matters most, however, is that criticism and debate, especially the well-argued one, were not lacking. This means that freedom of thought and speech should not be prevented through the imprisonment of bodies.

There are spontaneous questions that arise in the face of the current situation and which seem reducible to a single fundamental one: what is philosophy for? Or: "What have philosophers written in the past in the face of thousands of deaths caused by the event of an epidemic?" Some ask themselves more concretely in what philosophers can contribute what effective contribution they have made or can give to the solution of the problems that are oppressing us, as if they were a caste of specialists. This perspective, rather than magnifying the figure of philosophers, diminishes them. Perhaps the pandemic will serve to remind us that philosophy cannot be reduced to any professional category. In fact, no philosopher before has written directly on epidemics or pandemics (perhaps with the sole exception of Camus who wrote *The plague*<sup>9</sup>), although some such as Fichte, Hegel, William of Ockham, the Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz died during one of them.

But let's go back to the more direct and crucial question: "What is philosophy for"? Many people reply that "Philosophy is the thing with which or without which everything remains as it is." Instead, I like the answer given by Cornelio Fabro<sup>10</sup>, which was the following: "Philosophy is not at service, but reigns." It was a somewhat aristocratic answer and almost a joke. However, it expresses something true: philosophy does not have the task of providing tools or instruments to be used in concrete life. This is the task of technology, but this does not mean that philosophy has no other task in front of even concrete situations. I will summarize this concept by saying that philosophy aims to *give a sense* to reality. From this it can then derive duties, concrete indications and guidelines for practice in the situations that lie ahead. How does philosophy this work? It does this through *rational reflection*. This is the methodology of philosophy in dealing with the different problems it deals with and that are not few. We will therefore try to identify which are, in the current situation, some themes on which philosophical reflection is focused.

## Some important topics

Faced with an invisible threat, such as the spread of a lethal virus, people realize their status of being mortal and, automatically, fear is induced, along with anguish, as well as a sense of helplessness, loneliness, and vulnerability while all hope is put in new technologies. These are some of the points we will try to develop in the following lines.

A first point concerns our *critical thinking*, which is an indispensable vaccine in present times and has been seriously damaged by the impact of the mass media which are today the most used tools to obtain the consent of people, often unaware of the influence that these means exercise on their choices. It is precisely this unconsciousness that favors the manipulation and suppression of the individual's critical faculties. The era we live in is the media era. An era of information that spreads thanks to the means of communication such as television, radio, the press or the internet, capable of touching millions of individuals in a short time and influencing them, thanks to their manipulative power, dictating how to dress, what to consume, what to love or hate, putting our freedom of thought at risk. As Joseph Overton explains, in his theory of social engineering, called "The Overton Window"<sup>11</sup>.

The alarm concerning the pandemic and the spread of COVID-19 has triggered a real infodemic, (an overabundance of information, sometimes true and sometimes false on a certain subject) and this, according to the WHO, does more harm than the Coronavirus itself. The images that the media and social networks disseminate every day do not lead to reasoning but directly affect the emotions of the viewer.

The spread of fear of a pandemic by produced the modern means of mass communication represents a real tool of manipulation and social control that involves psychological, political and economic enslavement, used by those in power, exploiting the viral processes of network and leveraging the mechanism of emotional contagion. Most people, as Overton explains in his theory, are not at all aware of the negative and manipulative forms used by the mass media to dominate us, condition us and guide our judgments, opinions, and behaviors, without our realizing this.

As the linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky argued, in his book *Media and Power*: "The manipulation of the media does more damage than the atomic bomb, because it destroys the brains." Claiming that a strategy of social control consists in stimulating the emotional cords to allow those who want to manipulate us to circumvent our critical analysis and act on our subconscious to implant or inject ideas, desires, fears, or to induce behavior<sup>12</sup>.

"When we feel threatened or find ourselves in danger, anxiety becomes stronger and stronger and so we adopt consistent and predictable behaviors to escape this unbearable emotion. Our critical capacity and the ability to keep situations or people at a distance are deactivated, because our brain is busy with more urgent needs; therefore, it becomes easier to manipulate us"<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, we run the risk of living closed on ourselves, afraid of a world full of enemies who, more and more, turn out to be "objective:" the foreigner (in particular the migrant) who brings with him diseases and other dangers; the underdeveloped who knocks on our doors threatening our wealth and well-being; people belonging to a different religion (different for us) which creates doubts already because they use a language that is foreign to us, and may adopt behaviors and ways of praying that we do not understand.

The critical spirit can help us defend a great value that is threatened today: the value of democracy. In a time of infodemic fake news – in which it is not easy to distinguish between truth and falsehood – in the face of the bombardment of often partial and biased news, reasoning, learning to distinguish true from false is very important and crucial. Moreover, in a time like this it is very tempting to entrust our freedom to some charismatic leader capable of solving our problems: the

great economist, the great cheater who offers us simple and miraculous solutions with slogans and clichés.

Another important point *fragility of man*. The pandemic puts us in the presence of the fact that we can all be affected and killed without distinction, regardless of age, sex, and even social conditions. The pandemic does not look at anyone and has shown that fragility is a typical condition of the human being as such. This is important because, as modern man grew, he lost the sense of his fragility: he had the impression of gradually becoming the master of the world, of history and also, of life, through the progress of medicine, technology and ways in which he could organize his existence. On the other hand, we realize, and the pandemic has been very clear from this point of view, that this underlying fragility is not completely eliminated.

At this point another one is connected: that of *vulnerability*. Vulnerability is partly synonymous with fragility, but with an extra accent, since who is vulnerable is the one who can be *injured* and this is important because it indicates that the human condition is also exposed, apart from its initial fragility, to be further affected. This is what is happening today: we are affected in our everyday way of living, we can no longer do what we used to do and this regardless of whether we have to go to hospital and maybe even loses our lives.

A fourth point is that of the *impotence* of the human being, which is different from what we have previously considered. Impotence means being in the condition of not being able to do anything substantial. Let's try to consider how we are behaving towards this pandemic and how people were behaving 200, 300, 1000 years ago. Practically in the same way: the only defense that we are able to offer is isolation because, despite all our progress, this sudden appearance of a new, unknown virus is such that even the most advanced technologies we have available could not help us. After all, when they tell us to go out with masks, respecting the safety distances and avoiding the contagions corresponds to what people did at the time of the Manzonian plague, of the plague mentioned by Boccaccio<sup>14,15</sup>, of that narrated by Thucydides<sup>16</sup> and so on... This fact is very significant because the man was gradually taking the attitude of the one who, giving time to time, could do everything. There was no longer a sense of intrinsic limits. Instead, this experience is showing us that in the most fundamental situations, such as that of surviving a particularly violent disease, we are unable to react much more effectively than by hiding, or isolating or protecting ourselves as our ancient ancestors did. All this leads us to reflect on the reasons that gave man the impression of being omnipotent.

We do not want to underestimate the progress of science or technology: there is no doubt that today we know much more and much better than our grandparents, great grandparents and ancestors; not only that, but also that we can do many things that our grandparents did not even imagine. But all this must not give us the impression that we have become the masters of life and nature, that we have become the builders of our existence.

No, man is not the builder of his own existence, man is still a creature, that is, a being, privileged from many points of view, but who is always part of creation, even if he has qualities that allow him to progress in a certain sense indefinitely. This must be especially emphasized today, when there are ideologies that even imagine proposing a future created by man himself through technology. I speak of transhumanism and posthumanism which even come to speculate that man can go



beyond himself, thanks to technologies that he somehow incorporates. But where does he incorporate them? He incorporates them into his body and in this way he thinks of changing his ontological constitution, as is said in philosophy, that is, his true human substance.

Is all this possible? What we are experiencing now is showing us that, despite the great progress that exists, today we are not yet in possession of a precise and specific drug and not even a vaccine against coronavirus, despite the fact that there are hundreds of laboratories in the world working in those research, behind which are very powerful pharmaceutical industries that pay for these research with the prospect of obtaining large profits. Man cannot predict with certainty, for example, that within 2 years we will have the expected drug, rather than within 10 months. We will therefore say that the volume of our knowledge certainly increases, however, as it happens when we increase the volume of a sphere by inflating it, the surfaces, that is, the border with the infinite space of the unknown, also increases, both from the point of view of knowledge and from the point of view of being able to do.

We do not enter into complicated discussions concerning the consequences of technological development, that is, the unpredictable consequences of many things that we are doing today. It is sufficient to reflect on the current pandemic that cannot be addressed within the limited perspectives of the specialized approaches of single scientific and technological disciplines. The problem is not to have certain *certainties* but to understand the *global scope* and the *fundamental* situations, and the substance of things. Philosophy can and must help us understand and interpret with attention and clarity the challenges that this present time puts before us. We often hear that nothing will be the same after this pandemic. Therefore, when the health emergency will be over or at least under control, we will be faced with great choices, which affect us all as citizens and members of the great human community. Which world do we want to build? What values do we want to put first?

Another aspect on which we are invited to reflect in the current situation is that of *solidarity*, understood as the overcoming of individual selfishness to take into consideration the *common good*, because it has been realized that the individual alone cannot resolve his problems: one must be able to count on a community and therefore has responsibilities towards it. So the interest, the well-being of the individual ends up coinciding with the interest of society. On the other hand, we cannot think of promoting the progress of society without the participation of the individuals who make it up. We have seen this even in an elementary case that of the obligation to go out with masks. The most common masks are not those that protect the wearer from contagion, but those that prevent one from bringing any pathogens to the outside. It may seem that the individual accepts the discomfort of the mask for the sake of society, but in reality it is clear that if everyone used the masks, he too would be protected from contagion. It is a very basic example that makes us understand how this coronavirus experience has made us discover a very important dimension and an essential value of our current life. Plato conceived the state as an organism made up of different classes, with different tasks in which balance and well-being were achieved only with the solidarity and commitment of each class in fulfilling their task. The ultimate and shared goal was always justice. Only in this way could the maximum virtue or the good be achieved. We too must commit ourselves in this difficult time in our commitment for the good of society. Perhaps within a situation of difficulty we can still find positive sides, perhaps we could appreciate more what we have and what we take for granted every day, without being intimidated by the fear of illness and death.

The last aspect of this pandemic that forced us to reflect was the *presence of death* always looming. Contemporary society has tried to marginalize death. Conversely, in these months death has been brought under our gaze continuously and this has also led us to recover the most precise sense of medicine. The aim of medicine was traditionally considered to cure and recover *health*, since it was obvious that death was an inevitable natural fact. Today, on the other hand, it seems that the main purpose of medicine is to defeat immediate death, to save the patient's life even at the cost of condemning the residual part to an extremely painful state from many points of view. The fact that in recent months, we were put in the presence of so many deaths prompted us to reflect on the event of death itself, that is, to think that, once we arrive at that moment, we could ask ourselves *what sense* our life had, what are the things for which it was worth living and what instead those who have left no trace of themselves in our existence.

This too is an aspect on which philosophy has long reflected, proposing hierarchies of values of different type. The present situation can help us reflect on how it is better to live well knowing that this life will have its end. In this sense, the role of philosophy would basically be to recognize one's biological limits, to teach to die (both literally and symbolically as a passage to a world different from what we have known so far). This is certainly a noble tradition of philosophy ranging from Plato, Cicero, Seneca, to Montaigne and Schopenhauer and beyond; however, it is based on the idea that in a difficult moment, as we have already pointed out, philosophy cannot do much because its task is not to find solutions to problems but simply to teach us how to accept them. "Whoever taught men to die would teach them to live," Montaigne observed<sup>17</sup>.

The topics mentioned so far are not part of the usual university teaching programs. What is at stake is our way of life, the society we would like to have, the way we have to educate ourselves and others, and it does not seem that the faculty programs, with their evaluation methods, their indexed journals, their conferences, and accreditation committees are very open to these problems.

The coronavirus event confirms that the scientific data are in a crisis of objectivity, renewing the competition in the scientific field on the data itself. Science has its own history and the fact is an active and passive construction without a dividing line. The dramatic experience of the pandemic has highlighted a total lack of shared knowledge. The existential consequences have led to a modification of life in terms of proximity, learning, the intertwining of life, and a more disenchanted world.

## What help can we expect from philosophy?

Let's now return to our second initial question: what contribution can philosophers offer in the COVID-19 emergency? For philosophers who work in the field of ethics and bioethics this pandemic stimulates various reflections and probably opens up new fields of work. Let's start by simply acknowledging that there are no experts on COVID-19 at the moment: everything is being learned in the field. And very often the urgency puts doctors in front of difficult choices which they should not be obliged to make directly but relying on protocols established by a body of bioethics experts who should prepare new guidelines to make ethically responsible decisions and to know how to better spend limited available resources to improve the health of the population and rationalize the funds for medical care.



A final observation that I would like to underline (and with this I conclude) is that philosophy and the pandemic teach us that we are all passing through in this life, but also that the *crisis* (another Greek concept introduced in medicine by Hippocrates) leads to two possible outcomes: relapse or recovery. Hence, there is not so much distance between learning to die and learning to live. The feeling of frustration and discouragement toward philosophy should not win. The philosopher's task is not to find the meaning of life or to tell others how they should live but to provide conceptual tools useful to those who make difficult decisions, in communicating and explaining them to others. If we see philosophy in this way, then there is still much work for philosophers to do, not only in the current situation but also, and perhaps above all, in the future.

When Plato wondered how it was possible to ensure the best in the life of a state, he thought that this task should be entrusted to philosophers who, precisely because of their ability to encompass the good of each and every one, are able to establish needs and dictate public policies to meet them. This project seemed plausible because, at the time of Plato, the philosopher was in fact a scholar with knowledge also in the field, for example, of the natural sciences and mathematics, as well as exercised on reflection on the great themes of the meaning of life and moral responsibilities. Even today the public authorities, the political leaders to face the pandemic are assisted by committees of experts, but these are simply scientists and technologists, each capable of giving assessments from the narrow point of view of his competence but no one is able to offer the indications of wisdom and basic orientation that would be necessary and we are faced with the uncertainties and contradictions that we all know. Even today philosophy would still have its voice to express in the face of the difficult choices that must be addressed.

It would seem that philosophy, which is concerned with general matters, should not be concerned with pandemics, which is a fact. In reality it has all the credentials to analyze the pandemic both on the epistemological and on the existential register. Indeed it can intervene in an incisive way. The coronavirus event confirms that the scientific data are in a crisis of objectivity, renewing the controversy – in the scientific field – on the very concept of data. Science has its own history and “the fact<sup>2</sup> is an active and passive construction without a clear-cut dividing line. The dramatic experience of the pandemic has highlighted a total lack of shared knowledge. The existential consequences have led to a modification of life in terms of proximity, learning, the intertwining of life, and a more world.

In the past 30 years, specialists have become protagonists, upsetting the relationship with the outside world. We communicate with reality by, schematizing it as something objectified and immobile, while we are an integral part of it. We slip into abstract certainty despite the unexpected or the unpredictable. We must be aware of this error and not confuse the complexity of the situations with the superficiality of the solutions; complexity is the opposite of simplification. In this dramatic period, everyone was able to say anything in front of the cameras. Therefore, it is urgent to return to competence and reflection without falling into generic declarations.

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