

## From the Faceless Pandemic

**Dr. Emilio Sierra García**

Universidad CEU San Pablo University and School of philosophy (Madrid, Spain)

### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic that the vast majority of countries on our planet have suffered has caused and revealed serious effects on the society in which we live. The conception of the person as relational or not, the theme of presence and digitization, love, death and personal relationships speak of a collapse in what refers to the conception of life.

The essence of life, of which Thoreau spoke, has become the maintenance of optimal health, even if we do not know what for. We seek a healthy life in the first place, and in third or fourth place, a meaningful life. This fact introduces a profound contradiction into the core of our existence: what is the point of living a healthy life if it is meaningless? It has been demonstrated that a healthy but meaningless life produces depression and anxiety. The same pharmaceutical companies that manufacture vaccines are the ones that sell anxiolytics. I think of all those people who for many days, like myself, arrive home after work, healthy and meaningless.

This conference is about social media and Relationships in times of pandemic. The fact of the use of the mask, the consequent mystification of the eyes and the loss of the face, the mass vaccination, the loneliness that bursts into us and our relationships sifted by the screens have clear consequences in the self-understanding that the human being has of himself and in his relationships. The faceless pandemic has changed the face of the earth.

Keywords Pandemic, Human being, Relationships, Social media.

### From the faceless pandemic

Like a modern *danse macabre*, we see tired health personnel (doctors, nurses and auxiliaries) dancing around us, numbers of infected rising and falling, new vaccines, new security measures, anxiety, insecurity and death dancing among them all, holding out its hands to us. In the fourteenth century it was a skeleton that came to look for us, the baleful scythe and its rough bony hand. Now comes to us a dying viral particle to take us with it, but not before, making us participate in a colossal feast in which it calls, this time, not only bishops, kings or merchants, but also acclaimed youtubers, adorable elderly, heroic mothers and some other innocent child.

The filth of disease and the silence of death break into our world of hygiene and noise. The hygiene of fashion, of waxed and tanned skins, of bodies equalized by aesthetic surgeries. The noise of tablets, of smartphones, of the thousand and one chores that can be called to do or tasks, the noise of night and day, of work and vacations. This hygiene is now covered by a mask that hides the face and its makeup, veiled by latex-covered skins and prophylactic hydroalcoholic gels. The indistinct bodies are camouflaged by protective barriers against the

virus, which is nothing more than a form of death. The noises have been exchanged, they are not message tones or prefabricated music, they are the beep-beep of the respirators of the full ICUs, the breathing of the one who sleeps next to me and may, in a few weeks, after a sudden and unexpected contagion, no longer be there. An immense tide of pain without number reaches our necks, but, mysteriously, we remain painless. The number of contagions has already dropped and the measures taken by governments are becoming lighter and more bearable. Some believe they can forget the irruption of mute chaos in our world and in our lives. However, there are chaos and pains, chapters in human history, that are impossible to forget. The Black Death that swept through Europe and Asia in the 14th century, the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki or 9/11 are events that have shaped our world and our way of thinking and relating to each other (McLuhan, 1962). They are chapters that cannot be forgotten, even if one wants to. A clear image of a society that tries to forget or to believe that what happened does not have a word of sense about what its tomorrow will be is like a man who has had his house robbed, beaten and burned down, and pretends to restart his journey without, not only shaking off the ashes he holds on his shoulder, but also repairing and healing his wounds to see how to embark on a new path.

We have all counted the numbers of the dead, the changing numbers of the infected, the asymptomatic and those admitted to the ICUs. The appearance of death has not generated an opening to the mystery, but has led to the human face being pushed into loneliness. Numbers, the desire for control and statistics: depersonalization. Loneliness before Covid-19 was covered with screens, with sporadic or merely professional relationships; now, after confinement, it appears naked and, although we are no longer confined or in quarantine, the memory of that nakedness does not leave our mental retina.

The essence of life, of which Thoreau spoke, has become the maintenance of optimal health, even if we do not know what for (Thoreau, 2016). We seek a healthy life in the first place, and in third or fourth place, a meaningful life. This fact introduces a profound contradiction into the core of our existence: what is the point of living a healthy life if it is meaningless? It has been demonstrated that a healthy but meaningless life produces depression and anxiety. The same pharmaceutical companies that manufacture vaccines are the ones that sell anxiolytics. I think of all those people who many days, like myself, arrive home after work, healthy and meaningless. Almost a century ago the question of suicide made a radical difference (Camus, 2021; Dostoevsky, 2008). The human question par excellence was to live with meaning or not, to commit suicide in the face of it or to resist the onslaught. Today not even suicide makes sense, preferring the tide, the drift and the anesthesia that covers us with an existential amnesia. Not only do we not want to remember what has happened, but we also refuse to learn from it and draw all the good that disasters offer to the human species.

*Happycracy* dictates welfare, but a tiny viral particle disobeys the regime and revolts our way of life. Pain appears. A pain from which we flee but which is necessary. Pain makes

life. The slogan “you are worth as much as you smile” is discovered as a trap of what has come to be called “positive thinking”. When the desire for happiness is a social imperative and not an inner longing, the frustration between what I would like to become and what I am produces a collapse. The peak of the crisis occurs when the internal contradiction between how I would like to feel and how I actually feel is perceived. A life built on the back of pain is a life that renounces the feet to walk on the hands. In the long run, the fatigue is such that one stops walking or becomes accustomed to walking on one’s hands and... stops being human.

In this sense, B.-Y. Han speaks of the bloody reverse side of selfies to show that, in one of the paradigmatic acts of our civilization, taking a picture of oneself, one veils more than what one pretends to show (Han, 2017). Some tribes in North Dakota think that when they take a picture of you, they steal part of your soul and not only your inner image. Until a few years ago, photos were taken of others, a landscape or a monument. The phenomenon of selfies shows a lot of blood spilled in a desolate interior, full of howls or, at least, without any company. It is certainly possible to accompany this type of digital self-portrait with other people, but it is a fact that after the various confinements, the publications with one’s own gesture had a drop of loads to the network. Many workers because of teleworking washed only their face, while ragged underpants or pajama pants went unnoticed at the angle of focus of the camera. The dehumanization is shown in the markedly narcissistic character that only what is seen matters.

However, if only what is seen matters, what will we do as long as we have to live covered with a mask, how will our humanity survive veiled by oxygen, by the Indian and by the tin of touch screens? What will we do if, in the end, we only see something that is presented to us partially, without reality and through a thousand and one layers of protection, filters and make-up?

The virus brings us back to reality, makes us land on the emptiness and on the density of the earth that constitutes us. It has not taken us out of our comfort zone, the comfort zone is something post-bourgeois with a thirst for adventure and self-improvement, but it has taken us out of the habitats of complacency, out of the cold isolation of the human world with respect to the natural world. What happens when the human being reconnects to nature and to himself through uncontrol and pain? Here we echo Fromm and that imperious thirst for a love that makes us leave the prison of our loneliness (The Art of Loving). The reconnection between human beings and the world and between human beings and each other confirms a fact: “Without love, humanity could not exist another day” (Negro, 2009).

However, how to love in times of tactless and faceless Coronavirus?

In 1963, H. Harlow conducted an experiment with newborn baby monkeys. He exposed them to two mannequins. One was soft, fluffy and heat-producing. The other was a wire frame that held a bottle of mother’s milk. The baby monkeys used dummy number 2 for feeding, but spent the rest of the time with dummy number 1. They were looking for comfort and support.

Animal warmth. The experiment of Frederick II Hohenstaufen who, looking for the original language of the human being, let twelve children be raised without any contact with the world and other men, is very well-known. They died after a few years. We need love, contact and faces. If it is not given to us, we become mad, inhuman, exhuman (Harlow, 1974). The post-Covid-19 society is a society that has been deepened by a wound it had been carrying: loneliness. In this sense we participate in a schizophrenic society with structures that feed back mental unhealthiness. E. Syristova states that schizophrenia is a mode of existence whose central problem is loneliness, isolation, lack of relationships and detachment from real life with a loss of meaning. Many schizophrenias are caused by the experiences of social relationships and not by major traumas (Syristova, 1979). Isn't it similar to the current pandemic? Syristova tells of an experiment that was conducted on Russian astronauts to habituate them to the silence and solitude of space. They were isolated for 14 days. It didn't take long for the psychotic symptoms to show up. How many days did we endure in our homes? I had to wander from one place to another because my father's health was fragile and, because of my profession, I was in contact with people and therefore exposed to contagion. We were not prepared for a voluntary cloister. All at once, I became nomadic and dependent on friends who were not sufficiently afraid of the unknown virus that had entered our midst. None of us were guilty to be confined, against our will, in a remand prison (Syristova, 1979).

And there we found ourselves. We felt our loneliness because loneliness and materiality go hand in hand. I am myself, material and impenetrable, unique and therefore alone. Me in my prison with my own. Quarantine meant reliving the concentration camp experience, but on a home and individual level. Survival reigns. In a society where experiences are given as gifts, those famous boxes that offer moments of adventure, of romance, of spending time together, the experience of imprisonment was offered to us. But this experience was neither wanted nor sporadic, it was prolonged in time much more than we would have liked. Heidegger says that: "to have an experience with something, be it a thing, a man, a God, means that it happens to us, that it attacks us, that it engages us, upsets us and transforms us" (Han, 2018). This kind of experience is not given in a box, but one can be thrown into it without wanting to. What effects can it produce? we will see some in this conference.

The touch theme will also appear as something fundamental in the constitution of the human. I remember John Mann returning to his native Australia and perceiving the loneliness of the world, the distrust of the remnants of an emotionally post-apocalyptic era. At a party a girl he doesn't know comes up to him, gives him a hug and... his world changes. Hugs can change the world. This, beyond a concrete experience, has a whole psychological and anthropological background that has to do with the transactional analysis of unconditional positive signal. Well, even if we are not familiar with John's initiative to go around the world giving hugs to strangers who feel lonely (the free hugs movement), we do know the need for a hug at certain times of the day or of life. And now? We have moved on from free hugs to elbow greetings when that

inexplicable moment of no-hugging when words have to do it and say it all to avoid physical contact does not happen. It is also possible to touch, but an infinite distance is felt in the touch, the loneliness, the insufficiency is touched and caressed. A change is taking place in human relationships, how far will it go? Today we are unable to venture the extent of these events, but somehow, we see in the light that Magritte's painting, *The Lovers*, has become a reality. In the painting, the lovers kiss with a cloth covering their faces and veiling their identities. In life, the mask, the latex, the video call connection also conceal and veil us.

All this also entails a corresponding prophylactic phobia. Although human beings feel drawn to others, to contact, to interrelation, the environment and the media not only prohibit and veto this in various ways, but also give rise to the need to cover up and separate oneself in order to protect oneself. Security measures are necessary and prevent the proliferation of the virus, that is true, but in the long term, what repercussions do they have on the minds of the protected?

Another important issue is the mystification of the eyes and the superficiality of the gaze. The use of the mask has highlighted that the eyes are not enough to know someone and to be able to communicate with them. It has often been asserted that the eyes of the other have a creative power over us, that they were capable of rescuing us from oblivion or restoring our dignity as if the gaze were tactile, but it is not. It is revealed as insufficient. The mouth, the nose, the chin, the lower part of the face, reveal the face in fullness and, therefore, it is strange for us to relate to each other with a mask. Accustomed to wearing a mask, the deprivation of the other's face mystifies the eyes and prevents us from forging close and human bonds. The face-to-face is diminished by a piece of cloth that prevents us from seeing. Observing the place from which the words emanate establishes a greater connection with the speaker. Thus, we have all experienced how the degree of compression and commotion between a chat conversation, by phone, video call or face to face without a mask, varies considerably. We need to see who is speaking to us and contemplate their whole being speaking.

The use of the mask, necessary and unquestionable, has also developed an unnatural modesty, especially among the youngest. In several of my classes there are students who do not know what their classmates' faces look like and when, in course presentations, I ask them to lower their masks quickly to "put a face" on them, some refuse because "they are ashamed". Shame is associated with modesty and modesty comes from not wanting to show something intimate that can only be seen by whoever I want. But the face, being the most intimate thing we possess, has never before been associated with modesty in Europe. What does this mean, what does modesty have to do with anonymity, what does this modesty have to do with the sense and understanding of what is intimate in our world? (Han, 2014).

Mass vaccinations have been depersonalized to a certain extent. Long lines of people of the same age solemnly walking through hospitals that look like sports facilities, in three seconds they receive the corresponding dose that allows you to present yourself in society and

hope you don't get infected. Never before has health been a mass phenomenon. Here we will have to turn to Ortega y Gasset to delve into the meaning of the idolatry of health, knowing that the vaccine is something we had better count on for the end of this epidemic (Serrano de Haro, 2010).

It may seem that we are only witnessing the desertification of the human. However, this is not true. There are many glimmers of hope. Not only has insomnia increased, we have been deprived of subversive modes of language such as speaking low (since with the mask everyone speaks low), but we have also become aware of our finitude and mortality and this is a major breakthrough. When we live as if we were immortal, we tend to delay our acts ad infinitum, without any interest in performing them now, here, right now. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow they are safe and feasible. But now that we live in the presence of death, we are somehow obliged to make the most of the limited life time we have. The smallest opportunity we have cannot be wasted because it may be our last. This is what lies at the heart of the disproportionate binge drinking that with great virulence seeks drunkenness, the provoked lack of control and, in some cases, violence, a catharsis of appropriate and erroneous proportions for the trauma of loneliness. The parties of the post-Covid-19 era are akin to the bacchanals that followed wars and pandemics throughout history. It is as if quarantines and confinements have involuntarily performed the Morita method. As if the psychotherapeutic practice in which the patient is isolated from everything and can only eat, wash and go to the toilet had happened among some of us. In this method only this can be done, something similar to confinement, the rest of the time the patient has to remain lying on a bed. The result is not long in coming. After a few days, patients want to return to their lives with a much more stable health; no more depression, neurasthenia or psychosis. They know that there is something worse than any trauma or psychological illness they can come to: the Morita method bed. All of these attitudes reflect a lack of meaningfulness, the dominance of fear in thoughtlessness and what we will call the experience of the primacy of the cage (Han, 2018).

Now that the scourge of this plague seems to be easing a bit, we are aware that the opportunity cannot be wasted because any moment can be the last. But can a life project be built on such an approach? Does the *carpe diem* of the days regained to health and the next normality admit some nuance to repair and settle the world to come? There is always a future that can dazzle today with a different tomorrow. The force of what will be drives the possibility of what is.

The whole discourse of the conference is not a macabre chronicle of dark times belonging to a silent and discreetly distressing apocalypse. They are symptoms of an era that is being forged and in it there is room for the prodigy, for the restoration of the human, for the rediscovery of the tiny sparks of light that await us in foreign hands that reach out to us with tenderness.



Certainly we are at a crossroads in human history not only because of the Coronavirus pandemic, but also because of other more silent or media pandemics: the lack of emotional literacy due to the crisis of face-to-face human relationships, the consumption of pornography at an early age that sterilizes the ability to love without possessing, the war in Syria, Tigray or Ukraine or the forced migration of refugees arriving in Europe. The Coronavirus has revealed that our world is a weak and cracked world, a liquid and dissolved world (Z. Bauman) that cannot face the only certainty of what is human and that which surpasses it: death and love.

To think about the effects of Covid-19 is to think of everything we have talked about as clues to a path that 21st-century humanism has to follow.

The central effort of modernity is to increase its unlimited access to the whole external world and to be able to generate a permanent availability. However, this causes a progressive alienation between the (experiential) subject and the (encountering) object: man and reality. Against this silenced world in which there is no more dialogue, we can make use of Harmut Rosa's concept of resonance, understanding it as the unpredictable relationship in an unavailable world. Indeed, resonance occurs when we engage with the strange, the irritating, with everything that is beyond our reach. The outcome of this process cannot be predicted or planned, so the event of resonance is always accompanied by a moment of unavailability.

Covid-19 has revealed the fundamental unavailability of the most common human experiences: illness, death, love and relationships, the meaning of life and transcendence. We must dare to think about what is identified as the fundamental contradiction of modernity and the questions about the unavailable. In this way, a reflection arises that can perhaps shed new light on the political and personal problems of our daily life, in the internal and external struggles that we carry out every day.

Where is the limit of what is human? How can we build a humane and united world? Peace, love, hope and justice are not abstract values but profoundly human values that require the human to exist. The return to nature as temple and home, the cultivation of quality interpersonal relationships without digital intermediaries and the resurgence of critical thinking that addresses fundamental and inescapable questions on a daily basis will make a new humanity possible. After COVID-19, perhaps a new renaissance will emerge if we know how to choose wisely the path of the human.

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