



## Reflections on Understanding Illness

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The current time of COVID-19 brings up many questions. Some are deeper and ask for more than a simple answer. What is a virus, actually? Why do some people get sick and others not? Does being healthy mean never getting sick? Does illness have meaning?

We would like to turn to some of these questions as points of contemplation. These are human, evolving questions and you cannot find the answer to them by googling them. They require examination, reflection on one's world view, and a striving for true knowledge for oneself. In our times, with constant access to all the information on the internet, we can feel further from knowing how to listen to our own sense of truth. How do I know what I know? With a lot of contradictory information being presented, and "fake news" having become a widespread concept, how do I come closer to true knowledge?

We invite and encourage you to not just accept what we share and what you hear from other sources, but to consider it, think it through, and see how it matches what you experience. Does it help you to live life more fully and meaningfully? We hope that this process can be a support in these trying times. However, we are aware that the process of taking up these questions requires effort. We live in an age when individual human freedom is essential. Listen to yourself, if this is the time to enter this process, or if it is not, or if it is to only partially do so.

### **How do I know what I know?**

As a society, we have come to a point where we generally believe that we can find the truth through numbers, through statistics. Most of today's science is built on this concept and turns to empiric studies to come closer to the truth. Medical science is a prime example of this. In our usual thinking, we are not very conscious of the possibility that a study could come to a result that is false, although this possibility is expressly acknowledged and calculated in statistics. We are even less conscious that the idea that numbers and statistics are the best way to find the truth is not an undeniable fact

but a belief. For millennia, philosophers have struggled with the question: How do I know what I know? There is a whole field of philosophy, epistemology, devoted to this question.

What the media present to us these days are numbers: People with infections, deaths, people who may die if we do not do this, that or the other, etc. The State exerting all-encompassing power over our lives is justified with numbers. Many people agree with this because of numbers.

Numbers are important; they provide valuable insights. If we do not pay attention to them, we miss something really important. However, we can become aware that they provide only *one* side of the truth. Please excuse the use of a couple of anatomical words to exemplify this in an exaggerated form: From a purely statistical standpoint, as it averages out, every human being has one breast and one testicle. The truth is all-sided, not one-sided and therefore complex. There are many things which we do not know, including and especially about the current situation, which is uncomfortable. Are we not called upon to supplement the only seemingly clear world of numbers, of quantities, with the world of qualities, which we cannot measure? Do we not live our daily lives out of that combination most of the time? Can we measure love, joy, meaning, fear, suffering, dying alone?

If we use purely intellectual logic and numbers, any viewpoint can be proven or torn apart. We can see this happening all the time in the world around us, dividing people into groups.  $2 + 2 = 4$  then becomes an agreement; how do you know it is not 5? How do you know that other human beings really exist (this question can even be found in a Hollywood blockbuster like "The Matrix")? Is COVID-19 very deadly or not more than the annual flu (arguments are being made for both)? Quickly there is no foundation anymore; we experience fear and try to find some anchor, e.g. expert opinions.

To get closer to the truth we have to bring together our sense impressions, which come from the outside, with our concepts, which arise out of our own thinking. How do I know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? *Take a moment to look into your own soul with this question.* What do you come to? I think the content of  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and then penetrate this thinking with my feeling and willing. Does it feel true or untrue? When I use my will to apply this to the world, do I experience it as true – does it help with life? Finding truth becomes an activity of our whole soul. I come closer to the truth not by proving it with my intellect, but by experiencing it with my whole being. Each one of us can do this and is doing this.

As another example, did you have the experience as a child of memorizing multiplication tables at your teacher's request? Do you remember or can you imagine how stressful that was and how little relationship you had with these numbers if taught this way before understanding? You had to just accept it and memorize them in order to get a good grade. But if you had a teacher who brought out oranges or coins and taught you to understand multiplication and division through your own experience, a light bulb went on and you could see it yourself. As adults we often still feel the anxiety of the first situation described: We unconsciously believe that someone else has thought it

through and knows better and we just have to accept it, even when it means neglecting our own common sense and experience.

To come closer to the truth, I have the possibility of experiencing life with my whole being, instead of only looking at numbers, controlled trials or purely intellectual reasoning. This experience can become the solid foundation on which I can fully live my life. The more we are conscious about this, the more help it will bring, for we will not be so easily swayed by purely logical arguments. And is this not a task for our times: That we think things through ourselves and find our own stance in the world, our own sense for truth? Our current time is giving us many opportunities to strengthen this in ourselves.

### **“Human being, know yourself!”**

What is illness? What is health? Like any question that pertains to the human being, these questions require a meaningful view of the human being. All disciplines that deal with the human being – education, psychology, sociology, medicine, etc. – view the human being in one way or another; however, often we are not conscious about these views. If we start to explore them, new vistas open up.

Today’s medical science generally views the human being as built up out of molecules that form cells that form tissues that form organs that form an organism. Out of the material organism, consciousness arises. A virus is another physical particle. The picture of a physical particle, the virus, docking onto my physical body and then doing something to it, while I, i.e. my physical body, is the passive recipient, is based on a materialistic picture of the human being. This picture induces fear: In the end, health and illness are results of the laws of physical nature with statistical probabilities, and I am at their mercy. Death means complete annihilation, and so it is no wonder that, as a society, we are terrified of death. Fear of death seems to be a major reason for much that is currently happening in the world. We invite you to pay attention to how these ideas live within your own soul. Do they sit on your shoulder through life? How may these ideas have affected your feelings and actions?

When I *experience* myself and my fellow human beings as beings of body, soul and spirit, this fear can transform. With a different view of the human being and the world, new perspectives on health, illness and death open up. Suffering now may hold meaning and help me to develop and heal, even if it leads to physical death. Perspectives beyond death and the concept of destiny can become a reality.

This is not to mean that life is not of high value. On the contrary, being consciously aware that death is an inevitable part of earthly life can help us to live life more fully, meaningfully and open to all its beauty and possibilities. It also allows us to ponder how we would like to die long before this time actually comes, and to discuss our preferences regarding end-of-life care with our families and friends.

We cannot simply choose our view of the world and the human being – to change and develop it we have to have stillness, wrestle inwardly, ask questions, bear with uncertainty. Looking into our souls as described above for questions around truth can provide one approach, but there are many others. As we stated before, individual human freedom is essential in this; there is no one size or one path that fits all. Each one of us has to find our own individual approach to the call: *“Human being, know yourself!”*

### **What is an acute inflammatory illness?**

COVID-19 is an acute inflammatory illness. What is an acute inflammatory illness? Acute inflammations dissolve forms, they digest and loosen structures and make possible excretion. Thus, they create space for new impulses and processes to create new forms and structures. Fever is their hallmark sign.

Our soul life and our bodily processes are interwoven and deeply influence each other. For example, physical exercise can influence how we feel and think; feeling anxious affects our breathing and heart rate. The quality and health of our bodily processes affect our entire being. Many parents report that after an acute inflammatory illness, especially if it goes along with a fever, their child takes a significant developmental step. Many adults report experiencing “feeling cleansed” after an acute inflammatory illness, with the possibility to take up new impulses. Obviously, like all processes, acute inflammation can become overwhelming, “too much” and lead to death.

Looking at the phenomena, acute inflammatory illnesses are the opposite of sclerotic, hardening illnesses. In sclerotic illnesses, there is too much form and structure, too much hardening. Examples are atherosclerosis (the hardening of the blood vessels which leads to heart attacks and strokes and is the leading cause of death in the US), cancer (the second leading cause of death in the US) and chronic inflammatory illnesses, e.g. autoimmune illnesses. From a holistic viewpoint, acute inflammatory illnesses have the potential of balancing out hardening, sclerotic tendencies. This is a major reason why we usually advise against fever-suppressing medication.

Acute inflammatory illnesses are common in childhood. Is it far-fetched to see them as necessary for the development of children to take hold of their own bodies, whose forms and structures were inherited from the parents? Might we consider that an acute inflammatory illness in an adult provides an opportunity for development, to take up something we failed to take up earlier? Can we open our thinking to consider the dissolving and loosening of sclerotic forms in the acute inflammatory illness as an opportunity to loosen something in the soul and create space for something new? Should we not give illnesses their time then, instead of rushing back to normal life as quickly as possible? What are we called upon to do now, when a break in normal life has been put upon us as individuals and society?

COVID-19 primarily affects the airways, lung and all breathing processes, including the oxygen exchange in our hemoglobin. Breathing in and out is a bodily function, but the same term is used for soul activities – we “breathe out” when we relax, which again points to the intimate connection of bodily and soul processes. Breathing also is one of the fundamental rhythmic activities of our body. When one experiences an acute inflammatory respiratory illness, one may ask questions like: Has something in my breathing become too rigid, too fixed, and needs loosening? How is it with my rhythms? Have they become one-sided or fixed? In a time of a pandemic like this we can perhaps ask this as a culture as well. There are no simple answers to these questions, but they provide points for contemplation.

Another question may arise: Is it the virus or bacteria that causes the illness in the true, encompassing sense of “cause”? There is no COVID-19 (the illness) without SARS-CoV-2 (the virus), so the virus obviously has an important role. However, there are many people who carry the virus and do not or only mildly get sick. How can we then say the virus causes the illness? Up to 20% of well children carry *Streptococcus pyogenes* in their mouth, the bacteria associated with strep throat – can we really say it causes strep throat? Or does the virus or bacteria seize the opportunity that presents itself in the human organism when it is out of balance and already not healthy? May there be healing in going through an illness? Paracelsus, the great physician of the Middle Ages and “Father of Toxicology”, said: “Every illness is a purging fire...” There also is the following anecdote:

“Five doctors and the wise Paracelsus stood around a dead person contemplating the reason for his death due to cholera at an early age. The first doctor said the patient definitely died from the cholera infection – as he saw many people die of this. The second doctor said: I do not think so for I have seen many people survive this illness – he did not follow healthy life rhythms in eating and sleeping, work and stillness, causing a weakened immune function. The third said: Oh no, a good healthy immune system depends on clear positive thoughts and healthy relationships – he was lacking in positive thoughts. The fourth said: I know many people who have survived through horrible circumstances and still have positive thoughts – it is the character of personality and constitution that matters – he must not have cared for or could not identify with himself and was not yet centered in his personality. The fifth said that this all sounded rational, but he had learned about destiny and divine guidance and some die young and some die old – as destiny is God’s will – he must have been called home. The wise Paracelsus said: You know, dear colleagues, you are all right, there are many aspects of illness. If you isolate your reasons you will never understand the cause. The human body is complex and it is wise to reflect on all aspects of life.”

### **How can we strengthen ourselves?**

Like with any infectious illness, COVID-19 arises from the interplay between a microorganism (in this case the virus) and a host (in this case the human being). We are hearing a lot about the virus, how to kill it by disinfecting, how to limit exposure, etc. This is important. However, we do not hear a lot about strengthening ourselves to be able to deal with the virus. The main organ in the human being that comes into play here is the immune system. It senses what is “I” and what is “not I” and

digests/destroys what is “not I”. As such it is a manifestation of our unique individuality. There are many things we can do to strengthen our immune system.

Fear and high stress suppress the immune system. Aaron Antonovsky, who established the concept of salutogenesis (how we stay healthy, vs. the prevalent focus on pathogenesis – how we get sick), identified *comprehensibility* (belief that the world is comprehensible and to some extent predictable), *manageability* (belief that I have skills and resources to take care of things and some experience of control), and, most importantly, *meaningfulness* (a belief that life is meaningful) as the three main elements of a “sense of coherence” which supports staying healthy. He did some of his research with Holocaust survivors, just to mention what level of adversity these people went through.

Rudolf Steiner’s description that bacilli feed on fear and materialistic thoughts expresses similar ideas in the context of infectious illnesses. (Rudolf Steiner brought Anthroposophy, which forms the foundation for anthroposophic medicine, Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, the Camphill movement and some other initiatives.) As discussed above, *how I view the human being affects how I view health and illness and how much I am afraid of illness and death*. My experience of the meaning of life depends on my worldview: Do I live for going shopping, to the movies, sports events and on vacation? These times have taken all of this away and may leave a big void if this was what I lived for – this void may lead to fear. Is there a meaning of life that does not depend on our outer physical circumstances? What is the connection of the human being to the world around us and to the cosmos? Looking at these questions around meaning can support us in staying healthy.

Here are some additional points on how to support your well-being:

- Exercise and nutrition are foundational for a healthy immune system. Try daily walks, dancing with your children, slow stretches during alone time, etc. You also may want to try out these eurythmy exercises (if you are not pregnant): <https://m.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR1ZAqJVSmDfje4y-ttYMe150O1Llh5zpg8CLXn-R1Zs5FBUG3uH8vapfP8&feature=youtu.be&v=IPGFdojaVws>. Eurythmy is a form of movement coming out of Anthroposophy and is a way to bring one’s consciousness into one’s body and center oneself. Consider keeping a diary of your experiences while doing these movements.
- Eat whole foods, mostly plants and not too much. Eat a variety of foods. Eat more bitter and whole fresh foods and decrease sweets. This can help you to become more conscious of real hunger and healthy cravings. Regarding how much you eat at different times of the day, consider the old saying “Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, dinner like a pauper”.
- Avoid putting toxins like tobacco, alcohol or drugs into your body as much as possible.
- Healthy rhythms are another essential part of health:
  - Have a healthy, consistent sleep-wake rhythm; make sure to get enough, but not too much sleep.
  - Have a healthy, consistent eating rhythm.

- Monitor your rhythm of technology use and checking the news: Take regular conscious breaks from checking your phone, computer and other devices. Do that even more consciously with the news. Is there a real need for you to check the news more than once a day? Be mindful how you take in the news. Read rather than looking at pictures and avoid watching TV and news videos – these go into our souls deeply.
- Consider making time to go inward e.g. for meditation and reflection on questions like “Who am I?”, “What do I long for?”, “What lives in my heart?”, “How do I experience truth?”; most importantly, find your own questions! Consider keeping a diary.
- Find ways to connect with other people during this time of physical distancing. Write letters, make phone calls, etc. Social support is essential for health.

### **Some thoughts on the social situation...**

The current situation is strongly (without wanting to take away from the individual illnesses) a severe acute illness of our social organism, with all its many underlying chronic illnesses in many organ systems that make it susceptible to it. Acute social illnesses have been going on for a while in other parts of the world (war, refugee crisis, etc.), but now a severe acute illness has also arrived in Europe and North America. Maybe the illness “COVID-19” is no more the cause of this social illness than the virus is the cause of the individual illness? Can it manifest itself so strongly because of the chronic illnesses of our social organism? Does this social illness offer the possibility for social healing, like an individual illness for individual healing?

What are we called to do? We can separate more from each other or develop further our understanding of and compassion with each other. We can judge those who see the situation differently or hold up the ideal of freedom of thought. Do we want our communities to fall apart, to return to “normal” as soon as possible, or to transform and become stronger and more beautiful?

The ideals of a threefold ordering of the social organism can provide important points of contemplation in this context. In simple terms, these ideals are: *Freedom in the cultural sphere* (like medicine and education), *equality in the sphere of rights*, and *sisterhood/brotherhood, care for one another in the realm of economics*. A mix-up of these ideals and realms can lead to significant confusion (e.g. when we think that medical treatment should be equal, i.e. everybody with a certain diagnosis should receive the same treatment without meeting the reality of their unique individuality). We believe that these ideas are an important contribution to the social questions that are arising and therefore we wanted to share them at least briefly.

As we said at the beginning, this article is meant as a sharing of points for contemplation. Please take and leave from it and do with it as you see fit.