

Chapter 1

Not to Be Unworthy of the Event: Thinking Through Pandemics with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze



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Before and After

In early March 2020, I was at an archive in Switzerland, and then visited my mother in a senior living community in Germany. The COVID-19 outbreak seemed first a localized crisis (I thought: “Let’s not worry, I am not travelling to China or Italy...”). But there were indicators that it was more than that: Switzerland (which shares a border with Italy) was taking measures to limit large gatherings of people, like cancelling Basel’s carnival parades and limiting performances to 100 people in concert halls; German grocery stores were already out of toilet paper. The order to self-isolate began in those countries in the second week of March and in the USA a week later, right after I returned home. When the reality of the coronavirus pandemic caught up with Americans, my husband and I were housebound in our home for more than a year, like most people in our city. We all experienced the gradual halting of daily activities and public lives, the slowing down of social demands, the withdrawal of people to their homes, the shift of work to virtual media, the closing of bars, restaurants, and entertainment venues, the widespread fear of losing jobs, and the cascading erosion of economic life. The government was putting out continuous statements about the spread of the pandemic, the newscasts were all about COVID-19 and its impact, and public discourse had been coopted by the spread of the virus and what it does to the psychology of people who follow the recommendation to “socially distance”. I heard from many of my therapist colleagues and friends that everyone they talked to experienced a high level of free-floating anxiety. The reality of the pandemic was brought home to me when a good friend contracted the virus and was on a ventilator in the hospital. His wife and children lived in fear of getting sick as well, especially since one of his young sons has a rare form of leukaemia. In

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April 2020, my husband was hospitalized, unable to breathe and with COVID-like symptoms.

By May 2020, the rate of infection in the USA was growing exponentially with some dire warnings from health officials that 50% of the population would likely be infected in the coming months. The Israeli Government was screening people's cell phone GPS and informing them by email if on such and such a date they were in the vicinity of someone who tested positive with the virus. The following chapters give us glimpses into the social and psychological reality of life during a pandemic from Nigeria, Zambia, and Morocco, to India and the Philippines, to Australia, the Americas, and Europe as the virus ruptured the fabric of daily lives across the globe. In the meantime, we were wearing our masks and hunting for toilet paper and hand sanitizers during our infrequent stops at the grocery store and tried not to touch anything anyone else had touched. By the end of June, 2022, the US death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic was 1.01 Million, and worldwide 6.33 Million people. Each person left behind interrupted lives, mourning families, and often orphaned children.

Epi-demos and Pan-demos

This personal story and the stories of thousands of other people we hear in the media tell the human story of the pandemic, i.e. the psychological story from the human point of view. However, we can also step back from the personal experience of COVID-19 and look at the *event* of the pandemic and its *impersonal* unfolding on the level of larger social organisms. The word epidemic comes from the Greek words *epi*, which means “above”, and *demos*, which means “the people” (which we also find in *democracy*, the rule of the people). Epidemics have a reality on a level above individual lives: they are systemic phenomena. *Pan*-demics go even further and encompass “all” people and have a global reach. As we saw with AIDS, Ebola, SARS, and Zika, epidemics move through homes, villages, cities, countries, and across borders in unforeseen ways. They “break out” in “hotspots” and “spread” infections exponentially, overwhelm medical systems, and often lead to extreme political measures in the attempt to curb their spread. Epidemics and pandemics are *events* in the sense that they are occurrences that take over our everyday lives and increasingly determine personal and social realities.

Pandemic as *Ereignis*/Event

For our purposes of investigating the COVID-19 pandemic and exploring the intersection between the personal and the systemic unfolding of this event, I adopt here Dastur's (2000, 182) definition of event or *Ereignis*, which seems to speak to the confounding and unpredictable reality of the pandemic:

The event in the strong sense of the word is therefore always a surprise, something which takes possession of us in an unforeseen manner, without warning, and which brings us towards an unanticipated future. The *eventum*, which arises in the becoming, constitutes something which is irremediably excessive in comparison to the usual representation of time as flow. It appears as something that dislocates time and gives a new form to it, something that puts the flow of time out of joint and changes its direction.

As an *eventum*, the COVID-19 outbreaks across the globe have been a *surprise* in the unanticipated speed of their spread and the far-reaching impact they have had on human social structures. They *took possession of us* in an unforeseen manner. Before the pandemic, we could go on with our ordinary lives, but after the outbreak our lives changed, and we were not sure what the future will hold: Will schools and workplaces open, or will they close again? will we go to the wedding of our nephew next month? will our retirement investments recover? We entered a different reality, which was determined and directed by the pandemic. It owned us, and it possessed our lives in the double sense of the word: it possessed us, and we were possessed by it, i.e., we focused on it obsessively. The future we lived was *not anticipated* a few years earlier. It became open and unpredictable, and the certainties with which we lived our daily lives pre-pandemic were shaken. My hands touching the items on the grocery shelf were more hesitant, I scanned myself for every sneeze, and I called friends and family members more often to make sure they were still there and okay. Like many of my friends, I expect another pandemic to take possession of us, if not next year, maybe the year after or in 10 years, and maybe it will not be flu-like, but more like Ebola. I may be able to control my social distances from other people and get vaccinated, but the whole impersonal, systemic dimension of the pandemic is outside of my individual control: COVID-19 is *irremediably excessive*.

For the event, as such, is upsetting. It does not integrate itself as a specific moment in the flow of time. It changes drastically the whole style of an existence (Husserl 1970, 31). It does not happen in a world—it is, on the contrary, as if a new world opens up through its happening. The event constitutes the critical moment of temporality—a critical moment which nevertheless allows the continuity of time. (Dastur 2000, 182)

The word event evokes a region of life and a process of temporal unfolding which moves through humans and is changed by them, but which nevertheless is impersonal, ideal, and systemic, rather than personal. Foundational to Dastur's description of the event is Heidegger's notion of the *Ereignis* (event) which finds its culmination in the discussion of language as event. Speakers always already find themselves inserted to the language event when they make use of language in their speech acts: language speaks through the speakers (Heidegger 1982). Dastur and other French thinkers have widened the application of the concept of the event beyond the phenomenon of language and tie it to the surplus and saturation inherent in phenomena (Marion 2002), its foundational quality of surprise (Nancy 2000), and the future directedness of the event as temporal becoming and systemic proliferation (Deleuze 2004). They issue a challenge to phenomenology: "The difficult task of phenomenology is therefore to think this excess to expectation that is the event" (Dastur 2000, 183).

Deleuze's concept of the event in *Logic of Sense* (2004) brings into focus the *systemic* impact of events and how they move through and change interconnected systems. Deleuze allows us to think through occurrences in large social or ecological structures which, upon the occurrence of an event, change in a non-linear fashion and impact the reality of past, present, and future in ways that are often not readily discernable. The event in the Deleuzian sense can be described in the following way:

Events introduce change and differences within those structures, thus the event of a variation in a social practice draws a society out of line with known and expected patterns; it introduces difference and novelty. (...) For him, an event runs through series in structures, transforming them and altering relations of sense along the series. (...) This event is never simply an occurrence for the mind of a conscious human being. It is rather a set of multiple interactions running through bodies, ideal structures (such as languages or moral codes) and virtual structures (such as relations of emotional investment considered in abstraction from the bodies that carry them – changes in the ratios of the intensities of fear and attraction in a new relationship, for instance). (Williams 2008, 1)

This basic list of the working of events maps closely to the systemic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and illuminates some of its implicit dimensions. The form that our personal life assumed in the shadow of the pandemic event was not anticipated. Moreover, the anxiety that surrounds individual uncertainties is eclipsed only by the fear of the possible cascading decline of our social systems in the future, i.e. excessive changes that spread through the series of economics and politics, but also global health and food systems and even biological ecosystems. The pandemic runs through existing structures *transforming them and altering relations of sense along the series*. Here are two small examples: before the coronavirus outbreak only criminals and demonstrators wore face masks in public in order to conceal their identities and remain anonymous; today, the sense (meaning/practice/value) of wearing a facemask has been altered: it is a benign signal that the wearer is civic minded—and we overlook the anonymity of the face behind the mask. At the same time, political demagogues, who deny the seriousness of the pandemic, promote the view that not wearing a face mask is a sign of protest against government repression. Both sense practices have far-reaching and different consequences for the spread of the virus and its impact on the socio-political system of the future.

The pandemic breaks into our lives by infiltrating the human organism in unforeseen ways and by altering the surrounding social reality of the human species. It is *running through bodies* and bodily structures in its particular individual and local manifestations but also in the global spread since bodies are the carriers of the virus; some recover easily, while others die. It is excessive in its unforeseen impact on social bodies as it is *running through ideal structures*: it dominates the public discourse (local and global news), political reality (effectiveness of political leadership, need for public services, marshal laws), and the moral code (doing things for the common good, such as physical distancing and wearing masks). Finally, it alters *virtual structures* such as the value systems and emotional investments that will determine the social, political, economic, and ecological realities of the future. The pandemic stands as a *caesura* in the progression of our cultural time: a sharp

demarcation in the flow of time, a “cutting” of the ordinary rhythm of temporal flows, and an unanticipated pause before a different phrase begins. The COVID-19 pandemic is dislocating time and gives a new form to the future, a future whose direction we cannot predict at this time. It will also alter the way we make sense of the past and how we narrate how we got here.

The Body as Event

Before we look more closely at the excessiveness of the pandemic in the more systemic social dimensions, I want to introduce the notion of event into a discussion of the body, for the body is the ground where we encounter the concrete and intimate reality of an epidemic disease. COVID-19 challenges our natural scientific understanding of bodies as manageable machines by revealing a surplus or excess *in bodies themselves*, and that bodies, as part of larger ecological structures, do not exist in isolation from other bodies and from their environments.

We have a long tradition in phenomenology that is critical of the hegemony of natural science and technology and its claim to be the arbiter of what is real (Husserl 1970; Heidegger 1993; Dreyfus 2003; Straus 1966/1980). Parallel to this runs a reconceptualization of the body which grows out of Merleau-Ponty’s work (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1968): understanding the body as an anatomical machine is replaced by a conception of the body as experienced and lived and deeply woven into its perceptual action field. Merleau-Ponty’s work has had a profound impact on philosophy, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience (Adams 2007; Simms 2008; Olkowski and Morley 1999; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; Dillon 1997; Abram 1996; Dreyfus 2002; Clark 1998). Phenomenology is not against scientific research, quantification, and technological interventions, but rather tries to hold open the possibility for exploring the qualitative, sense-making dimensions of human life against the hegemony of scientific discourses in contemporary Western societies.

A key insight from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is summarized in this sentence: “the world is not that which I think but that which I live. I am open to the world, I indubitably communicate with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible.” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, 16/xvii).¹ The shift towards the investigation of human experience, which is a hallmark of phenomenology, led Merleau-Ponty to an understanding that the relationship between body and world is complex, open, and inexhaustible—but so is the relationship between consciousness and the body itself. This body that I am and through which I touch the world in perception and action has a natural and biological history that is larger than my own: “my history is the resumption of a prehistory (...) and my personal existence is the appropriation of a pre-personal tradition” (2009, 234/254). Beyond the conscious subject, there

¹The page numbers from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* refer to the 2009 translation by R. Rojcewicz, with reference to the 1962 translation by Colin Smith.

exists another subject, a body-subject which is “this captive or natural spirit which is the body itself” (234/254) which has already staked out a place in the world before my infant self ever took her first breath. My birth inserted me into biological and social event structures much older and more complex than my personal life. Newborn infants, for example, are well equipped to exist in spatial dimensions that have biological and psychological meaning, such as their ability to see the breast and the face of the mother, to turn to sounds and smells that they recognize, and to pick up on the complex musical structure of language (Simms 2008). However, meaningful spatial experience and the primary access to human language are not cognitive, conscious events but are part of the pre-personal, pre-predicate history of the human species and the result “of a communication with the world more ancient than the one by way of thought”:

Space, as well as perception as a whole, are marks, inscribed in the very heart of the subject, of the fact of his birth, of the perpetual contribution offered by his corporeality, and of a communication with the world more ancient than the one by way of thought. That is why space and perception engorge consciousness and are opaque to reflection. (Merleau-Ponty 2009, 234/254)

Prior to reflection, we live with a body that has its own nascent intelligence and communication with the world. In ourselves, we encounter a sphere of generality and anonymity which is the body itself, a body which is “a system of anonymous ‘functions’ which situate every particular bodily concentration in the context of a more general project” (p. 234/254). The “general project” is the body’s adhesion to the world, and, I would say, its function as a member of a species in relation to the equilibrium of the biological ensemble of its own and of all other species. Merleau-Ponty recognized that when we grasp the interrelation between the personal life of our bodies with the anonymous, pre-personal life that traverses them and that is opaque to reflection, we can find ourselves with “the vital experience of vertigo and nausea, which is the horrifying consciousness of our own contingency.” (p. 234/254)

Merleau-Ponty’s astute analysis of the anonymity of the body and our reaction of vertigo and nausea when we become aware of it also applies to the anonymous dimension of infectious diseases and how we experience them. COVID-19 can ravage the body and drown the lungs in their own fluid—or the body knows how to deal with it and you experience no or only mild symptoms. And we do not know how severe the attack will be: there are statistical models that people with compromised immune systems and the elderly are more susceptible, but none of us knows how hard it will hit us personally and how our body will deal with it, no matter if we are 18 or 88 years old. Much of the anxiety that we witnessed during the epidemic came from the vertigo inducing encounter with the anonymous dimension of the body and its contingency—and our inability to control it. Once the pandemic pervaded public spaces, the personal body almost inevitably communicated with COVID-19 and let it enter through mouth and nose. We did not know if we could trust our bodies to keep us alive and heal us from the injuries the virus caused—even with the support of medical interventions that are only as good as the body’s ability to heal itself.

Healing, on the most fundamental level, is always a gift of the anonymous body which medical treatment can ask for, but not guarantee.

The Event in the Body Politic

COVID-19 brings into view the impersonal event structure of the body itself, but also how it is inserted into larger event matrices, i.e. connected systems and processes which open up new fields of meaning (Merleau-Ponty 2010). The centre of our personal lives is determined by the location of the body and its field of perceptions and actions, but the body is also an impersonal, biological event, and as such, it is *unpredictable and surprising*, it can *take possession* of us, and it can *foreclose our anticipated future* and bring something completely *new* (and often not better...) and *excessive* “that puts the flow of time out of joint and changes its direction” (Dastur 2000, 182). When the event of the pandemic *runs through bodies*, and the pre-predicative, anonymous functions of our organisms determine our lives, the “communication with the world more ancient than the one by way of thought” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, 234/254) is also affected. The appearance of the world is changed. On the personal level, illness makes us withdraw from our action spaces, curtails our bodies to the horizontal position, and fades our attention out of the world into daydream, sleep, unconsciousness, or even coma. The world narrows and becomes the pale backdrop to the events taking place in the body. On the social level, the bodily event of the pandemic *runs through our ideal structures*, where the anonymous bodily activities of the pandemic raise a constant flow of contradictory discourses which either scare the population into isolating bodies from other bodies, or promise that all will be over soon and everyone can get back to their normal lives. This confusion of our public discourses and political practices points to a fundamental flaw in contemporary thinking, which is highlighted by COVID-19. We now live in a time where the illusion of the body as an isolated, anatomical object and as a machine that can be fine-tuned, repaired, and enhanced through technological implements is profoundly challenged. The standard medical practices for dealing with individual malfunctioning bodies are upset by the pandemic and prove to be useless: medical systems are straining under the onslaught of the exponentially increasing number of bodies that succumb to the virus. Larger social measures such as enforcing “social distancing” or quarantining of whole populations become necessary. We suddenly find ourselves in a space where science can only be effective *when the larger social-political system participates in medical treatment—or even becomes the medical treatment*. We are doing medicine no longer only as doctors and medical researchers on individual bodies, but as political participants responsible for other people’s bodies more susceptible to the ravages of the virus. Medicine is being performed by all of us on the body of our commons.

Ethics and Pandemic

Pandemics are woundings of our physical, but also of our social, ideal/political, and virtual bodies. Stevenson's chapter later in this book lays out the structure of the risk society, which produces an already high level of anxiety in its members, and argues that COVID-19 is a further manifestation of the systemic eco-anxiety that runs through contemporary societies. Many of us wonder if "going back to how it was before the pandemic" and "business as usual" is really what we want and need as members of the human species at this time in our cultural evolution. We live in a fraught time, and the pandemic event holds the future open so that we have the possibility to either patch up past structures or become something new. No matter if we apply Dastur's, Merleau-Ponty's, or Deleuze's insights, the events' excessiveness, surprise, and dislocation of time bring with it the possibility of new forms which can change the direction of history because they ripple through the whole collective system in unforeseen ways. We live in a time of great promise and great danger.

According to Deleuze, when faced with a cataclysmic event morality means nothing more than this:

Either morality is senseless, or it means this and nothing more: not to be unworthy of what happens to us. To grasp what happens to us as unjust and unmerited (it is always someone's fault) is, on the contrary, what makes our wounds repugnant – this is resentment in person, resentment against the event. (Deleuze 2004, 174)

We fail if we resent the event and fall back into blame and self-pity, which have grave consequences for our social bodies. Past pandemics often led to scapegoating of minority groups and a rise of nationalism and dictatorial political structures. The event is a calling from a future we did not anticipate and which even now we can only glimpse darkly. To turn towards the old past, old habits, and old political structures means that we have failed to live up to the possibilities and the gifts inherent in the pandemic. How can we be worthy of the event and not waste the potential for positive transformation? I want to mention only a few ethical calls which arise from the above discussion of the pandemic as event.

Events direct our attention away from the individual *figure* towards a more global, epi-perspective in which the *ground* of phenomena (to say it phenomenologically) calls for attention. *The impersonal perceptual and social field in which individuals are already embedded comes into clearer view and the web of connections between human beings is illuminated. The movement of the event through this network or matrix shakes up habitual structures and opens up new connections and possibilities.* On a simple level, we wear face masks not in order to protect ourselves, but to protect the field of others around us. The faces of the others behind their masks belong to people we do not know, and we protect them not because we are attached to them or particularly care for them as individuals, but because we belong to a *commons* threatened by the virus. We do it for the field that joins us and into which every one of us is inserted. We sacrifice our freedom of movement for what we traditionally have called the common good. *The ethics implied in the good of the commons is an ethics of balancing self-interest with care for the whole.* The

COVID pandemic has opened a clearing where the complex matrix of life in ever graduating and overlapping communities comes into view and asks for our response and responsibility.

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the generality and anonymity of the body and the vertigo we experience when we recognize that something impersonal lies at the heart of our existence can also be reframed. *The COVID-19 virus (which is a form of nature somewhere between animate/alive and inanimate/material) runs through our bodies and engenders a communication between two natural beings: human bodies and viruses. We should stand in awe before this conversation that nature has with itself in the anonymous folds of the body.* This does not mean that we should be passive, but rather understand that our medical interventions are there to support the body's capacity to maintain its strength and integrity and that healing is ultimately a mystery and a gift of nature.

If we begin to understand that we live in networks or matrices that have a non-linear spatial and temporal causality, we begin to see that our technological inventions have consequences that go far beyond the immediate effect on individual lives. One reason for the outbreak of a pandemic is the network of global connectedness created by aerospace technologies and the by now habitual practice of humans to travel across the globe. COVID-19 travelled on airplanes from Wuhan to Rome to London to New York, etc. Viruses have a similar impact on human bodies as invasive species have on natural ecosystems: they spread by intensified travel, they insert themselves into a local network, and they destroy the careful balance of mineral, plant, and animal forms because there are no checks against their activity. Humans did not intend to create a pandemic through aerospace technologies, but pandemics—and other invasive species—are an unforeseen consequence of their widespread application and habitual use. *The ethical call of the pandemic asks us to become more aware that technologies, as they are inserted into the complex matrices of human and natural occurrences, have unforeseen consequences, sometimes in distant parts of the network, and sometimes on a timeline that does not become visible until years later.* We have clear examples in the unforeseen impact of pharmaceuticals: PCBs were found in the bodies of arctic species far removed from the application of pesticides; birth defects appeared in humans decades after their mothers were prescribed DES (Colborn et al. 1996; Steingraber 2001). When we insert technological implements into nature, they do not simply vanish. There are no “side effects”—only effects. The ethical question becomes how the excess of technological implementation and use is valued, accounted for, and figured into the price of goods that result from these technologies.

One unexpected effect of social distancing and the practice of staying in place was the unusually clean air in our cities, the reduction of the human carbon footprint, and the quick return of animal species to urban centres. In 2020, herds of deer roamed through front yards early in the morning; a red-tailed hawk felt at home in my neighbour's tree; foxes and coyotes were coming more freely out of their dens in the woodland at the end of my street; you could hear the early morning concert of bird calls in the absence of traffic noise. The stay-at-home practice seems like a grand experiment: if we can do this for the coronavirus, perhaps we can also do this

for the planet. Perhaps we can muster enough of our new-found sense of working for the common good that the other great event which is moving through our systems and which is threatening to become a pandemic without compare, namely global climate change, can still be averted. Perhaps COVID will teach us to be common-minded, creative, and more inclusive of the well-being of all species. For we are all in this together.

My hope is that as the COVID-19 pandemic runs through our *virtual structures*, it will change how we see ourselves as the human species: no longer primarily *homo economicus*, the rational capitalist producer, but perhaps we can become truly *homo sapiens*, the “wise humans”, who become aware of the interconnection between all animate and inanimate structures on the planet and understand how our species fits into and respects the larger patterns.

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