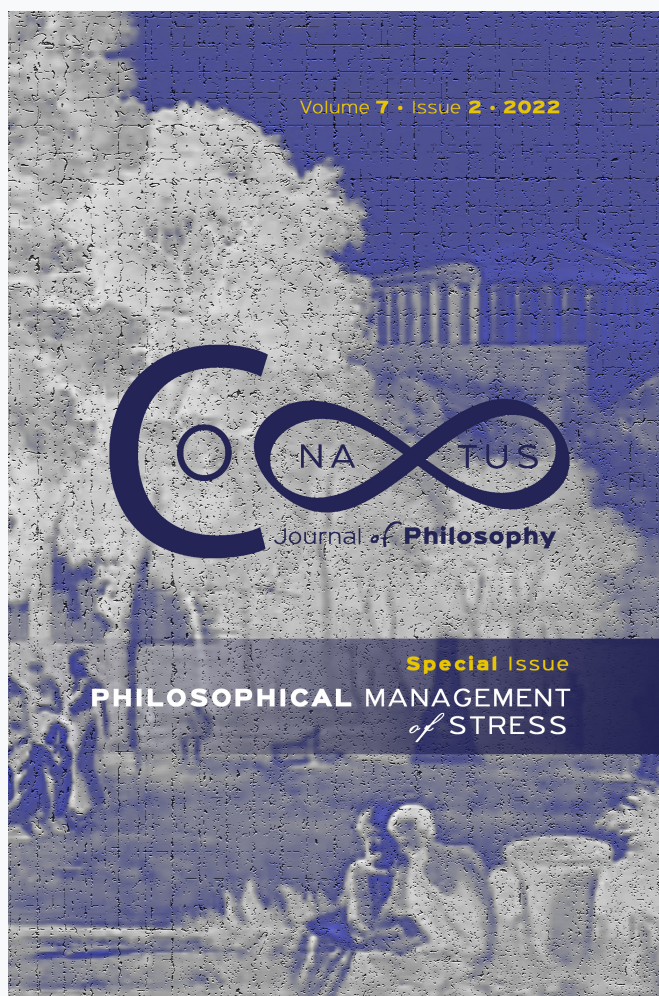


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 7, No 2 (2022)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Philosophical Management of Stress



### Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and its Limits?

*Emmanuel Roberto Goffi*

doi: [10.12681/cjp.26698](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.26698)

Copyright © 2022, Emmanuel Roberto Goffi



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Goffi, E. R. (2022). Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and its Limits?. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 7(2), 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.26698>

# Back to Eudaimonia as a Social Relation: What Does the Covid Crisis Teach Us about Individualism and its Limits?

**Emmanuel Roberto Goffi**

*Global AI Ethics Institute, France*

*E-mail address: [emmanuel.goffi@globalethics.ai](mailto:emmanuel.goffi@globalethics.ai)*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8771-4596>*

## Abstract

*The current health crisis that has spread worldwide has raised many questions regarding our relations to the Other and to ourselves. Through isolating people, Covid-19 has demonstrated the need we face, as human beings, to socialize and to get in contact, physically speaking, with others. As Aristotle stated, human beings are political animals, meaning social animals that can flourish only in the polis through the process of interacting with each other in quest of eudaimonia, i.e. happiness. Along with the rise of socio-physical distancing imposed due to the pandemic, people around the world have experienced isolation and the lack of human contact and interaction. In the Western world this isolation has led to an increase in mental health issues, and this fact has to be taken into consideration by the government when making decisions regarding the reinforcement or the slackening of measures in the context of Covid. The pandemic has shed a light on the limits of individualism as it has developed in some places. The quest for happiness has slowly led some societies to create a kind of a solipsistic world in which there would exist no reality, no truth outside individuals' perceptions. Consequently, each human being is considered as "the measure of all things," as Protagoras noted. This unique experience could then give us the grounds to question our relations to each other, to investigate our understanding of eudaimonia, and to revisit what it means to live in a society.*

**Keywords:** *ethics; individualism; happiness; society; knowledge*

## I. Introduction

It seems that with the Covid-19 crisis we have entered troubled times. Yet, looking deeper into the current situation, the pandemic is nothing but a new reason for feeling anxious about the world we live in. What is different about it is that it can impact anyone anywhere on the planet and that it concerns both our present and our future. While environmental issues

or terrorism are actual threats, it seems that people do not realise the reality of these threats the way they do the risks associated to Covid-19. It obviously is a matter of perception, since terrorism and climate change do impact us in a heavier way than Covid.

Nonetheless, even if some people feel they are not concerned with environmental issues and terrorism, it seems that most of us feel concerned about the pandemic. This perception currently makes the health crisis much more vivid than any other threats. Along with the political focus on the subject as emphasized by the continuous media coverage, the pandemic has a much greater influence on our psychology than any other problem the world is facing.

In an interesting way, it seems that the Covid crisis has stressed the need for social relations, whether in the workplace or during one's leisure time, alongside colleagues or friends and family; physical isolation resulting from the health crisis has shed light on something we may have forgotten: human beings are social animals.

Indeed, the quest for happiness has led us to some kind of egocentrism. The hedonistic societies we live in, particularly in the Western world, have reified the individual and made personal satisfaction an end in itself. In an unexpected way, therefore, the pandemic has brought in the foreground the excesses of our individualistic hedonistic societies.

In this paper we will contend that the current health crisis demonstrates that we have slowly and unconsciously lost sight of our social character. We will then argue that we now live in solipsistic societies where the Self has become a deity. Eventually, we will call for a return to philosophy as a solution to our existential torments.

## II. The quest of happiness

The current health crisis has shed a light on the importance of social relations. Working from home, social and physical distancing, wearing masks and the closing down of social venues such as restaurants, sport facilities and cultural and entertainment venues, have confirmed what Aristotle has already stated twenty-five centuries ago: "man is by nature a political animal."<sup>1</sup>

What the great philosopher wanted to stress was that human beings are meant to live in a *polis*, namely a city-state, within a society. For the Stagirite, "a social instinct is implanted in all men by nature,"<sup>2</sup> which gives them a natural sociability that is located at the foundation of the state. The Master of the Lyceum goes as far as to assert that "he who is unable to live

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1253a 29-30.

in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”<sup>3</sup>

Then, the natural environment for human beings is a society in which they can flourish and realize their natural end, namely the ‘good life’ (*eu zên*), in a social context. In his *Eudemian Ethics*, on which his authoritative and more mature *Nichomachean Ethics* was based, Aristotle stressed the value of pleasure not only as part of a happy life, but mainly as the highest end humans aim at, namely *eudaimonia* or happiness, for “happiness is at once the most beautiful and best of all things and also the pleasantest.”<sup>4</sup>

In that Aristotelian context, virtues are social skills that help individuals live in harmony with each other. They are at the foundation of Ethics and are considered as a mediator between the *ethos*, the Self, and the *pathos*, the Other.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, it appears that we have lost sight of this relational dimension of Ethics and of the importance of virtues as a source of balance and collective satisfaction. The pursuit of happiness, seen as a means for a greater social end, has turned to a more egocentric quest for self-satisfaction, for a very personal kind of well-being, in parallel to freeing oneself, to the greatest extent from pain and suffering, nay from death. Individualism has thus slowly taken over a more collectivist tropism. However, this assessment must be nuanced since it cannot be applied universally. Indeed, some cultures, in Asia and Africa, for instance, are still community-focused.

Individualism pervades Western societies, where the utilitarian perspective on the maximization of satisfaction is considered as the outcome of individuals’ satisfaction. But, contrary to some beliefs, this tendency to give preeminence to individuals over the group is not specific to utilitarianism and can also be found in Kantian deontology where imperatives are rooted in individuals’ volition and then applied widely, if considered universalizable.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the philosophical roots of this withdrawal into the Self are, it has led to the creation of atomistic societies where individuals are aggregated as an “organic solidarity”<sup>7</sup> based on a functional specialization.<sup>8</sup> In this kind of societies, well-being is mainly understood as the maximization

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1253a 27-29.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1214a.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Meyer, “L’éthique selon la vertu: d’Aristote à Comte-Sponville,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 4, no. 258 (2011): 57-66.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 111-133.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of satisfaction, namely of profits and property. Thus, each and every single individual is committed to their own satisfaction in an egoistic way. This does not mean that relations between individuals have disappeared, but that people are much more self-centred than they were when living in societies built on a mechanical solidarity.<sup>9</sup>

The pandemic has reminded us that we live in a community which extends beyond our Selves and, all the more so, beyond our own *polis*. We are rediscovering that in some ways we can be linked by a common fate but also that we all need each other in order to overcome this ordeal, that we cannot live isolated from one another for a long period of time. The reality of our sociability and our necessary interrelations has unexpectedly blown up in our faces.

Falling into individualism we have convinced ourselves that we are no longer cogs in a bigger ecosystem, but rather self-sufficient sentient beings deserving to be at the center of the universe. If this belief is still significant, it appears that there cannot be several centers of one same universe, and that at some point we have to think in terms of our interactions and interdependences. In other words, the Self is a social process.<sup>10</sup>

Covid-19 is challenging our convictions by putting us in front of a dilemma consisting in moving back and forth between our egocentrism and our social tropism. This difficulty to take a stance is illustrated by the coexistence of a strong demand for a return to normal life, that is a social life, and those egoistic behaviors regarding showing respect to the social distancing or mask wearing demands, which we feel are in opposition to our individual satisfaction without taking into consideration their impact on the community. On the one hand, people are asking for more social relations, on the other hand they remain self-centered. On both, they still favour their individual desires over the collective interest.

Deeply convinced that “man is the measure of all things,” as Protagoras stated,<sup>11</sup> we have entered an era of mistrust accentuated by the so-called new technologies of information and communication.

Our journey to well-being and happiness has led us to the belief that we could improve our lives in such a way that we could eradicate pain and suffering, and even postpone or abolish death. With this aim in mind, human beings have started to create objects that would help them get control over their fate, namely through *technē*, that is technique. This desire to control

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 70-110.

<sup>10</sup> George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Protagoras, *On Truth*, quoted in Kathleen Freeman, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels*, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 346-347.

our environment has increased in such a way that technical objects, initially created “for the sake of an end”<sup>12</sup> somehow essential, have become objects of consumption aiming at the satisfaction of nonessential needs. We have thus moved from *technē* as a system of knowledge that “partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her,”<sup>13</sup> to technology as a mere way to increase pleasure and to live a better life.

In turn, technologies and their promises have fostered this trend towards egocentrism giving individuals both the means to improve their well-being and to make their life easier, and the means to isolate from each other. Stuck in front of keyboards and screens we no longer need to go out in order to discover the world, for the world, or rather its appearance, is itself coming to each of us.

In this world where the individual is the alpha and the omega of *eudaimonia*, the need for social relations highlighted by the pandemic disturbs our self-centered convictions. The solipsistic society we have created in the Western world is now confronted with the social imperative for resilience.

### III. The solipsistic society

Armed with the conviction that *eudaimonia* is to be reached at an individual level, we have abolished any doubts about our centrality and rejected the importance of our social nature. Paradoxically, by falling into the trap of the Self we have espoused distrust as a philosophy of life. That is to say that the Covid-19 crisis is symptomatic of our defiance towards not only public authorities, but also science, and of our absolute certainty regarding our legitimacy to appraise both recommendations made by specialists and political decisions.

Everything goes as if no truth deserves consideration outside of our individual opinion. The idea that the only acceptable truth is our inner conviction is creating a solipsistic society, in which there cannot be any kind of truth, no reality outside of individual perception.

Revealing the ego through his famous statement “*cogito ergo sum*,”<sup>14</sup> (“I think therefore I am”) French rationalist philosopher René Descartes introduced methodic and radical doubt, whilst opening the door to further distrust and solipsism. According to Descartes “one cannot conceive a thing so well and make it one’s own when one learns it from someone else as one

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 199a 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 199a 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> René Descartes, “Meditation One and Meditation Two,” in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 59-69.



can when one discovers it for oneself.”<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the only thing that one cannot doubt is one’s own opinions. This conclusion is mainly due to Descartes’ very egocentric tropism regarding the quest for truth which gave birth to modern skepticism.

Unfortunately, on the basis of a methodology aiming at studying nature and the limits of knowledge, cartesian doubt has turned into a permanent challenge of reality, slowly leading to the unconscious but deeply rooted belief that truth can only stem from one’s own perceptions based on one’s inner experience and, as a consequence, that there is nothing real outside of one’s Self.

So, the world out there would be a mere representation, as Arthur Schopenhauer asserts,<sup>16</sup> a measure of one’s will. “The world is my representation” wrote Schopenhauer, since “no truth is more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, namely that everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word representation.”<sup>17</sup>

This philosophical stance can be reinforced by the sociological works of constructivist scholars. According to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, perceptions have a decisive role in the appreciation agents have of their environment.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, constructivism insists on the role of intersubjectivity as the founding element of ideas and beliefs. It is in this constructed environment that agents will refine their perceptions and construct a reality that will condition their identities, and further their behaviors. Then according to social constructivists, shared perceptions lead to schemes of thought that are common to several agents that once routinized will be institutionalized,<sup>19</sup> and then made real. In this process, as Berger and Luckmann emphasize, language is “essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” and participate in the building of reality.<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, following on Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin’s works, John Searle later postulated that social reality is intrinsically related to the observer and that objective reality is nothing else than a social construct supported by speech acts, that is by declarations bringing things into existence. Thus, some facts are “only facts

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup> Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 65-109.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 52.

by human agreement,” and some things “exist only because we believe them to exist.”<sup>21</sup>

In this general framework, individuals will develop both their identity and their social identity and act in accordance to what they think is expected by others.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard, reality can be totally constructed by individuals outside any rationality or objectivity. If reality is a social construction based on individual perception, then each individual becomes the unique holder of their reality. Obviously, it may occur that some individuals will share common perspectives and will then socialize and build norms and institutions that will stabilize their behaviors.

As a result, the idea that there is no truth outside of one’s mind has grown in importance making the real world the mere projection of our representations. Doubting everything has led us to doubt even the undoubtable, namely the fact that we are social beings and that our identity, our very existence, depends on others.

Technologies such as the Internet, the media, and social networks have added a new dimension to our journey towards the solipsistic society. Giving us access to an infinite quantity of data, it has flattered our egos, making us think that we have enough knowledge to assert our own opinions as general truths.

Yet, opinion is not knowledge as Plato stresses. In his *Republic*, Plato relates that discussing about opinion and knowledge with Glaucon, Socrates asked: “Haven’t you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? At the best of them are blind – or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from blind people who happen to travel the right road?”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, for the philosopher, opinion is intermediate, “darker than knowledge but clearer than ignorance,”<sup>24</sup> but opinion cannot be knowledge as knowledge indicates distinct spheres or subject matters.

With solipsism we have reached the point where we take data for information and opinions for knowledge. This knowledge coming from one’s inner perceptions, is consequently considered as necessarily providing one with all required tools to assert one’s truth. We have all been gathering data regarding Covid-19, and we have built opinions upon these motley elements until we felt that our opinions, which are basically poorly supported ideas, are

---

<sup>21</sup> John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Jan E. Stets, and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 506c.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 478c.



actual knowledge worth being expressed, and that, even more, whatever can be said by scientists or public authorities must be mistrusted, if not rejected. We live in Plato's cave believing that the shadows projected in the wall in front of us are the reality. We think, not unlike Gorgias, that nothing exists outside of one's mind,<sup>25</sup> assuming that individuals have a sufficient knowledge to hold the truth.

Nonetheless, even if we do not want to admit it, we feel the limits of our opinions in time of crisis. Doubt leads to uncertainty and uncertainty to anxiety. Doubting everything can be very uncomfortable and lead to mental health issues.

The aim here is to stress the importance of questioning our own certitudes to be open to others' ideas, and to enter into a rational, challenging and fruitful debate. By doing so, instead of being stuck in our own aporias and falling into schizophrenia, we could learn with and from others and move from opinion to knowledge.

As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote it in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, if one wants to widen one's world one needs to enrich one's language. This can be done only through contact with others. Here again, philosophy is a tool-of-choice in order to open up new perspectives; to discover the limits of our knowledge and the extent of our ignorance; to become humbler; and to eventually open up to others and reconcile with our social nature, rediscovering that *eudaimonia* is relational. Philosophy is not a panacea, but one of the paths towards happiness.

#### IV. Back to philosophy

In these uncertain times, where things appear to elude our understanding, the need for knowledge seems particularly vivid. Philosophy, in its strictest sense, that is the love of wisdom as Pythagoras defined it in the 6 century BCE<sup>27</sup>, can undoubtedly help us approach our current and future existential concerns. Obviously, the point is not to do philosophy for the sake of philosophy. The aim of philosophical reflection would be to reopen the door to knowledge and most of all to questioning. Stuck in our deeply anchored opinions, we are relentlessly watching the shadows projected on the wall in front of our inner

<sup>25</sup> Gorgias, *Concerning the Non-existent or Concerning Nature*, quoted in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 1922), 74.

<sup>27</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. C. D. Yonge (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1877), 166.

selves' caves with the conviction that they are the reality, the only possible one. As Plato showed it, the perspective from inside the cave is misleading.

Denying any truth that derives from our perceptions is dangerous for it closes us out of otherness. If it is legitimate to question reality, then it must be done through Cartesian reasonable doubt not through solipsism. Philosophers of intersubjectivity, such as Paul Ricoeur<sup>28</sup> or Emmanuel Levinas,<sup>29</sup> could help us renew our relations with others, understand that we are what we are, not only because we think as Descartes asserts,<sup>30</sup> but also because of the others, because of the look they take at us, because of the interactions we have with them.

Certainly, philosophy can be scary when used for its own sake and taught through ethereal concepts that seem distant from the reality of our everyday lives. Yet, philosophy is helpful when it comes to reflecting on our existence and when it is anchored into real ordeals. The problems humanity is currently facing, some of them existential, like environmental degradation, terrorism, the advent of intelligent machines, are ideal fields for philosophical investigations. These threats to our permanence offer us a unique occasion to renew ourselves through reflection, to question our certitudes, to challenge them via new perspectives.

To do so we need to escape from Cosm-Ethics, namely the reassuring narrative based on chosen wording referring to ethics without doing ethics.<sup>31</sup> Cosm-Ethics is as threatening as the topics it pretends to tackle. This artificially built narrative is misleading for it makes us believe that things are easy when in reality they are complex, hiding the intricacies of real ethics behind a veil of words that is slowly turning into a tyranny, a “despotism of discourse.”<sup>32</sup>

Bringing the debate back to philosophy would allow us to reconnect with knowledge and, hopefully, with freedom. Freedom can be worrying since it implies responsibility and to a certain extent the distress of our conviction.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007); Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, trans. Ivan Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> *Cosm-Ethics* refers to the communication strategy consisting in the use of ethical vocabulary without doing ethics. Just as cosmetics helps to adorn faces, Cosm-Ethics has taken over Ethics to make the crude reality more beautiful. Emmanuel R. Goffi, “De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (1): ce que l'éthique n'est pas,” *Institutsapiens*, published December 27, 2019, <https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-ce-que-lethique-nest-pas/>; Emmanuel R. Goffi, “De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (2): ce qu'est l'éthique,” *Institutsapiens*, published December 30, 2019, <https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-2-ce-quest-lethique/>.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel R. Goffi, “Ethique et confiance: la tyrannie des mots, le despotisme du discours,” *Journaldunet*, published October 7, 2020, <https://www.journaldunet.com/solutions/dsi/1494467-ethique-et-confiance-la-tyrannie-des-mots-le-despotisme-du-discours/>.

Adequate knowledge would clearly pull us out of our comfort zone and, at the same time, it would reduce the gap between the perception of simplicity carried by Cosm-Ethics and the complexity we all experience when looking at the world we live in.

Regarding this, ancient Greek philosophy should be ‘summoned,’ so to speak. Going back to the basics would be beneficial in that it would attenuate some concerns we might have regarding humanity and our role as individuals.

The study of Presocratic philosophers would, for instance, help us put critical debate and reason back in the spotlight. Obviously, within this group of “men of widely differing interests and profession,”<sup>33</sup> this Sophists’ stance must be nuanced in order to avoid the pitfalls of nonsense. But the teaching of debate through reasoned arguments would allow us to liberate ourselves from confrontations based on polarized stances grounded on subjective convictions.

What the Presocratics could help us with is the questioning of our firm beliefs through which we are able to access any kind of objective knowledge. In doing so they would invite us to display some reasonable doubt about our knowledge. As an example, in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Thales of Miletus started inquiring into the nature of reality through a pragmatic and empirical approach, that is through rational thought. Later, asserting that “*all is but a woven web of guesses*,”<sup>34</sup> Xenophanes denied “the possibility of absolute and objective knowledge,”<sup>35</sup> and deeply influenced metaphysics through his work on the nature of knowledge and of gods. Individualism has led to the reification of the individual, making each one of us our own deity. This recourse to rationale is even more necessary in today’s world where information is easily accessible but too often fake or biased. Presocratic philosophy could usefully shake our conviction regarding our individual god-like omniscience.

As Socrates asserted it, there is “only one good, namely, knowledge, and only one evil, namely, ignorance.”<sup>36</sup> Then, the first step in order to free ourselves from existential fears would be to admit our ignorance in order to venture into the path to knowledge, although limited and imperfect, but nonetheless knowledge. Studying Presocratic philosophers like Xenophanes or Thales might therefore raise some questions about both our knowledge and the very subjective way we have promoted ourselves to the rank of gods.

---

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Xenophanes, *Fragments* (DK, B 18; 35; 34). See, Karl A. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 152-153.

<sup>35</sup> Freeman, 97.

<sup>36</sup> As quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1915), 68-69.

Thus, with the Presocratics we could experience a new “Springs of Reason” rediscovering the “art of thinking.”<sup>37</sup>

Knowing is doubting. We have reached a point where doubt is the only option to save us from the fatal collapse of our societies. But doubt is uncomfortable. Yet, accepting doubt as part of the reality of our world is also helpful in understanding that, since we cannot comprehend the humongous complexity of the world, the quest for truth is vain. That this quest is leading us to reduce complexity to an apparent misleading simplicity. Admittedly, seeing the world through a simplification lens makes us believe that we have reached a certain knowledge that gives us some control over it. More than that, our appetite for silver-bullet thinking makes us potential victims for communicators and other narrative builders, not unlike the so-called demagogues mocked by Aristophanes in *The Knights*.

But doubt is not mistrust. Doubt is the thorough and necessary examination of life for an “*unexamined life is not worth living*” according to Socrates.<sup>38</sup> For the great philosopher, to make better people one must teach them how to think, and not what to think. People must be made knowledgeable and capable of thinking by themselves. So, knowledge is demanding, as it requires effort and commitment. It cannot content itself with superficial opinions based on simplified perspectives. It entails the acceptance of uncertainty, the will to get freed from ignorance since the first step towards knowledge is admitting ignorance.

The illusion of knowledge can be reassuring. Yet, facing uncertainties and the apparent contradictions and absurdities of the world, it becomes problematic.

This is where ignorance can help, namely through encouraging us to question all the opinions we have raised to the rank of knowledge and hence to the status of truths. Socrates, by stating that teachers are meant to teach people how to think through maieutic, must serve as an example in the context of the pandemic specifically, but in a larger spectrum of risks, doubts, threats and loss of sense in some societies. The very difference between knowledge (*epistēmē*) and opinion (*doxa*), as presented in Plato’s *Republic*<sup>39</sup> and illustrated in Plato’s *Meno*, provides us with interesting, even if not perfect, tools to examine our convictions and our tendency to think we know something while we are ignorant, since, once again, the elusiveness of the world is difficult to grasp for most of us.

Unfortunately, it seems that with individualism, the interest in debating has moved on to those opposing postures that are denying the possibility

---

<sup>37</sup> Barnes, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 476c-480a.

of constructive interactions and compromises. The refusal of our ignorance (agnosia) is putting us in front of the gap that separates us from knowledge.

Yet, the quest for happiness, *eudaimonia*, the one defended by Aristotle, but also by later philosophers such as Ricoeur, is vain if we remain self-centred and anchored in the conviction that we know while we actually are ignorant, and that what we individually know is of greater importance than what others know. Moving back to Aristotelian ethics, which founds *eudaimonia* on relations between humans, might help us overcome our concerns and anguishes.

Interestingly, Ancient Greek philosophy is not the only way to relieve us. Looking at other ethical perspectives grounded in other cultures would be useful. Lots of other philosophies, structures of wisdoms or spiritualities stress the importance the relation to others has regarding our intellectual stability and mental health. Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism in Asia, Ubuntu and Animism in Africa, aboriginal wisdom in Australia, New Zealand and North America could shed a light on the essential, if not existential, character of interactions not only with others, but also with nature at large.

These perspectives would be beneficial in challenging individualism, its drifts, and undesirable consequences. They would also be beneficial in that they offer us new ways of thinking that could free us from our convictions and reconcile us with others, and, consequently, with our Selves.

## V. Conclusion

We are, mostly in the Western world, experiencing a very unique situation where we have reached the limits of individualism. Facing the absurdity of the world we live in, our certitudes are shaken, plunging us in metaphysical doubt. The pandemic is stressing our inability to reconcile our egocentrism with the need for social interaction, causing mental distress and societal issues.

Surely, governments have taken the measure of the situation. Surely, companies, or at least some of them, are aware of the psychological outcomes of this situation. Some initiatives and decisions have been made to address these issues. Nonetheless, the way to recovery does not rest only on solutions coming from others. It also lies on our individual ability to reassess ourselves. This is exactly where philosophy, and particularly, but not exclusively, ancient Greek philosophy is to be considered not as a panacea, but as a guide.

The only way to avoid stress and anxiety is not to wait for help, but to deeply question our convictions and beliefs. Introspection is one of the key practices, and certainly the most complicated one for it implies the questioning of our mode of thinking.

Managing stress is, then, not only related to the improvement of individuals' environment and providing them with solutions. It is also to teach

them, through philosophy, to challenge themselves, to confront others, and to reconnect with *eudaimonia* through social relations.

## References

Aristotle. "Eudemian Ethics. De virtutibus et vitiis." In *The Works of Aristotle*. Vol. 9. Translated by Joseph Solomon. Edited by William D. Ross. New York: Clarendon Press, 1925.

Barnes Jonathan, *The Presocratic Philosophers*. London, and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1966.

Cicero. *Tusculan Disputations*. Translated by C. D. Yonge. New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1877.

Cooper, John M. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

Descartes, René. "Meditation One and Meditation Two." In *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1998.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by George Simpson. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.

Freeman, Kathleen. *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946.

Goffi, Emmanuel R. "De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (1): ce que l'éthique n'est pas." *Institutsapiens*. Published December 27, 2019. <https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-ce-que-lethique-nest-pas/>.

Goffi, Emmanuel R. "De l'éthique à la cosm-éthique (2): ce qu'est l'éthique." *Institutsapiens*. Published December 30, 2019. <https://www.institutsapiens.fr/de-lethique-a-la-cosm-ethique-2-ce-quest-lethique/>.

Goffi, Emmanuel R. "Éthique et confiance: la tyrannie des mots, le despotisme du discours." *Journaldunet*. Published October 7, 2020. <https://www.journaldunet.com/solutions/dsi/1494467-ethique-et-confiance-la-tyrannie-des-mots-le-despotisme-du-discours/>.

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor. Cambridge, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Laertius, Diogenes. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Translated by C. D. Yonge. London: G. Bell & Sons, 1915.



- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficile liberté*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2007.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethique et infini*. Paris: Fayard, 2008.
- McKeon, Richard, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001.
- Mead, George H. *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Edited by Charles W. Morris. Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Meyer, Michel. "L'éthique selon la vertu: d'Aristote à Comte-Sponville." *Revue internationale de philosophie* 4, no. 258 (2011): 57-66.
- Popper, Karl A. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover Publications, 1969.
- Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1995.
- Sextus Empiricus. *Against the Logicians*. Translated by Robert G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library 291. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935.
- Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke. "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1922.