

***On being more ‘living’ in time of pandemic: the lived experience of
being fragile***

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**Zoom Workshop of the lab of Micro-phenomenology
25 – 29 May 2020**

**Theme: Role of Micro-phenomenology research and practice
in the urgent ecological questions that our society is meeting**

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Introduction

Thank you to all three, through this workshop, for giving me, for giving us the opportunity to return to some experiences of the time lived during these last three months between the end of February and May 2020, qualified by many around us and in the Press from “amazing”, “strange”, “sidérant”. Indeed, this time we went through has been so new and “surprising” I would say that it has paradoxically not given us much opportunity to “metabolize”, in other words, to raise awareness and to verbalize it... Personally, apart from a few newspaper-articles relating to the inconsistency in the management of this health crisis by the Macron french government, I could not, did not want either to write anything about that was still being experienced.

This Ecomicrophenomenology workshop provides me with the perfect opportunity, and it is I must say a blessing, because I am not sure that I, without this external constraint, would have started writing anything. Therefore a huge thank you for taking this initiative!

In this contribution, I would like to offer you two short moments of reflection. First of all, how the containment period (*confinement*) self-generated a different relation to time, second, how and why this “regained” time (so Marcel Proust) did not correspond for me to a “liturgical” time (meditating or praying), how the grounding experience of that time then imposed itself on me under the term of “fragility”, and what kind of response to this weakening (*fragilisation*) finally emerged for me. At each stage, I will offer you a small microphenomenological self-explication vignette where I have sought to anchor these intuitions by returning to a few source-moments I experienced during this time.

A word concerning the term which is the signature of our workshop and which specifies here the microphenomenological approach, ecology. I take it here in its primary sense, which is well identified with the prefix “eco”. In Greek (tracing back to Aristoteles in his *Politics*),¹ “οἶκος” designates “the house” in the sense of the home, the center, the nourishing and nourishing living place, where one is oneself and “entre soi”, unexposed in the eyes of others, in short, where one “lives” (οἰκέω). Concretely, I (we) experimented with confinement, forced home-living, this “regained” place of the house, of “οἶκος”. It is this matrix sense of political ecology, more and before its contemporary sense of committed discourse for the environment and nature, that I will have in mind in what follows. Even if, of course, the lived rediscovered experience of my inner-house is the prime lever of a rediscovery of the environment, of nature, of other living beings and of a heightened awareness of the climate emergency and the probable apocalypse of our world (as Michaël Foessel in his *Critique de la Raison Apocalyptique*²).

I. The Time Regained (recovered?): a time without schedule

¹ Aristote, *Les politiques*, Paris, Flammarion, 2015, I, 2, 5-8, 1252b 12-14.

² Michaël Foessel, *Après la fin du monde. Critique de la raison apocalyptique*, Paris, Seuil, 2012.

As containment took hold over time for us, a number of my friends told me how it really did not change much for them. How it was even an opportunity to refocus more on themselves, to get in touch with themselves, even to no longer undergo the gaze of others or be exposed to their judgment.

After the first moment of amazement and awareness of the sudden change that this containment was going to cause, many of us indeed have rediscovered a different time, experienced another quality of time, a more “loose” time, with no schedules, a time “regained” in a certain way in the proustian sense, a time without time, that is to say without appointments, with no other obligation than the one I suggest to myself. For me, at some point, this time received a name. It called itself “Jouvernex”. Jouvernex indeed is the village in the Alps near the Leman lake where I go each summer, my family and ancestral place, a place where I spend every summer and winter holidays since I was a child, a place where I “find” myself again, which makes me “enter” in myself again, a place where I “make solitude”, a place which is deeply evoked by the beautiful word “vacation”.

Jouvernex

So here is a first micro-sequence of self-interview which I offer to you and I invite you to go into this moment with me.

At some point, the word "Jouvernex" crystallized during this time the intense emotional flavor of a time regained. The condition of the emergence of the word in my consciousness was, no doubt, the immersion into a slack time without deadlines. There was the taste of a different atmosphere from what my appartement in Paris usually triggers. But there was more: the constraint to no longer move, to stop going outside, this is also what I experience each summer at Jouvernex, my perimeter being in fact limited by the only use of a bicycle. Here

are the conditions of emergence of the word in my consciousness.

*I will evoke now the very moment of the arising of the word. I'm sitting at the window in the living room, the only place in the apartment where the sun shines through the window. It is early in the afternoon. I am surrounded by my "interior garden": an olive tree, aromatic plants and flowers. We had lunch with my daughter. I hold a coffee cup in my left hand. Without doubt I have recreated without knowing it the concrete conditions (the afternoon, the sun, the seat, a small garden) of "Jouvernex", but I don't know it at this moment. I hold in my right hand Simone de Beauvoir's book La Vieillesse, which she wrote in 1970, and I feel I am literally "tasting" this moment. Little noise in the street, voices in the distance. No cars, the street is extraordinarily empty. I take a few sips of hot coffee. I feel the heat of the sun on my skin. I feel myself breathing more deeply, opening my rib cage, as if to fill me with air, my chest broadens, I get inside the atmosphere of this moment. There is **then** the diffuse taste of a familiar atmosphere: I close my eyes and I visualize the stairs of my house in Jouvernex, the warmth of the stone, the cherry tree opposite in the garden, the sounds of magpies and sparrows in the tree, and I hear myself saying internally: "Jouvernex". Later I will write a texto to a friend: "You see, I can't go to Jouvernex, so Jouvernex came to me." With this word that came to my consciousness, it is my whole bodily and emotional "archaic" anchorage that was lived implicitly and that became conscious.*

So, like many of us, I actually deeply experienced this slowdown in time, to the point of telling myself every day, as the fateful date of the decontainment of May 11th approached, that I would carry on this containment after this date and make of this external constraint an inner choice. "Stay at home" would become the inner barometer of my daily life. This way I would get rid of the hustle and bustle that makes up our urbanized lives.

However, despite many incentives, both from a small voice within myself or from friends who regularly offered me to participate in meditation, yoga, prayer session in audio or video, I didn't "take advantage" of this new "regained" time to meditate or to pray more or better. I even believe I have experienced a desert, a void, a kind of meditative and liturgical poverty. Did I become unspiritual?

There is a curious paradox here: at the time when time is offered to us a hundredfold, the taste vanishes: I no longer have the taste; while often praying or meditating are neglected on the pretext that "I don't have time to"; now, when there is plenty of time, the desire for what is essential for me recedes. During a phone call with a friend, I even formulated this as a need for an "liturgical asceticism".

If I try to make sense of this borderline feeling of absurdity, what I sense is an inner move of weakening (*fragilisation*) emerging, which I will try to unfold a little bit.

II. The experience of fragility/frailty³

So first, this feeling of inanity/absurdity responds to the absolute distress of the situation we are living now, and which we know has no reason not to last.

That is what generated in me this diffuse feeling of aweakening. It has been written a lot in the media: this unknown virus confronts us with the essential fragility of our humanity. In moments of mourning, violent death, loss of a beloved one, we are confronted with this more intense feeling of absolute weakening of our being. Each time it is but a fleeting or even a lasting ordeal, which settles for a time in myself, before

³ This theme is scarcely broached in philosophy or in social sciences. Some few thinkers thematized it though, like Paul Ricœur in *Finitude et culpabilité*, volume 2 of his *La philosophie de la volonté*, Paris, Seuil, 1960, 2009, Livre I, chapter 4, « La fragilité affective », pp. 124-184 : « the heart would be the fragile moment per se », p. 125, and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986), Cambridge University Press, 2001.

receding into the background of my consciousness. Very I am taken up again by everyday life and daily interests.

With the arising of this unknown virus, this weakening of my being was increased tenfold, except that it applied to myself directly, and not to a fragility of my being experienced by “proxy” in connection with the loss of others. Thinking about it, this feeling of brittleness took place in a social, political and existential context with at least three dimensions: first, the social and collective time of the first two weeks of containment (from mid to end of March) reverberated in myself in the existential prevalence of a dull anguish of being contaminated without knowing it and a life on hold, a suspended life waiting each morning for the emergence of possible symptoms.⁴ Secondly, this basic anxiety, that was reactivated each morning when I woke up with this sentence in mind: “phew, no fever”, was intensified by the feeling of insecurity caused by the incoherent political management of the health crisis by the French government.⁵ It triggered a feeling of not being at all reassured and supported by an unequivocal State discourse: a feeling of abandonment, of increased instability; thirdly, there was the ambivalence of my relationship to death as being made of both confrontation and denial, and this ambivalent feeling was intensified during the health crisis by the obscene mixture of the counting of deaths every evening in the media and the political refusal of any support for the dying people and their relatives.⁶

⁴ S. Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), where the initial distinction between *Angst* (*anguish-angoisse*) *Furcht* (*fear-peur*) and *Schreck* (*terror-effroi*) is proposed ; see also M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927) for the more famous yet later distinction between *Angst et Furcht*.

⁵ N. Depraz, « Science et pouvoir. Quand une aveugle guide un aveugle », article published in the french Newpaper *Libération*, 15th of april 2020 (https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/04/14/science-et-pouvoir-quand-un-aveugle-guide-un-aveugle_1785198). See also earlier in *Le Monde*, « Le macronisme et le spectre de l'épistocratie » (18/10/2017) ; N. Depraz, « La peur, c'est la paix », *Agence internationale de Presse Pressenza*, 20/05/2020 <https://www.pressenza.com/fr/2020/05/la-peur-cest-la-paix/>. In italian translation: <https://www.pressenza.com/it/2020/05/la-guerra-e-pace-anzi-no-la-paura-e-pace/>

⁶ N. Depraz, “Mourir en temps de pandémie”, *Agence internationale de Presse Pressenza*, in press.

In fact, this existential feeling of extreme fragility I described it on the basis of its social political context is anchored in a specific moment to which I would like to come back now thanks to a small moment of self-interview.

Waking up/Awakening

I named this moment waking up or awakening because it is both a bodily waking up and an inner awakening. So here is the second sequence of self-interview I would like to share with you and which I invite to experience with me.

It is Monday morning. It is the first Monday of March. We are not contained yet. I wake up and I feel something different inside of me. During the whole previous week, I have been buried in my bed, high fever, exhausting dry cough, feeling of difficulty in breathing. Every morning I look into myself searching for the worsening respiratory signal that will become: "go to the hospital now"; or for a feeling of better-being, a sign of remission. But, every morning, I make the same selfdiagnosis: same feverish state, same respiratory congestion. I feel that it can be coronavirus, however I deny and I wait, I watch for signs ... My body is fighting I feel it. Rising fever as the day progresses, collapse in the evening. But as I woke up in the morning of March 2, something has changed in my body. I get up, I inspect myself inside, and suddenly I understand: the fever has subsided. I walk in the apartment, I check my internal state: my head is lighter, my forehead cleared, I feel my eyes more open and, also, suddenly, I feel my rib cage which opens, a childish pleasure of playing at inspire-expire, an ease and a jubilation to simply breathe. I just feel "more alive" at the same time that I feel incredibly more fragile. The tension which responds to the struggle in the body and mind against what has rightly been called "the invisible enemy" now meets a relaxation which results in emotional relief and a huge need to breathe, literally to expire, as after a shock, to fill your chest to the

bottom to experience the breath, breathe in, breath out, check that you are still alive.

This feeling of increased breathing, where the lungs swell and empty, the french writer Maurice Blanchot testifies very intensivly at the end of his small book-testimony in 1944, *L'instant de ma mort*, which magnificently echoes this infinite opening of life in death, here, of death in life (it's all one):

“The one the Germans were already targeting, waiting only for the final order, then felt an extraordinary feeling of lightness, a kind of bliss (nothing happy though), - sovereign joy? The meeting of death and death? [...] Henceforth, he was linked to death, by a surreptitious friendship. (...) Then undoubtedly began for the young man the torment of injustice [...]. However, at the time when the shooting was just waiting, there remained the feeling of lightness that I could not translate: freed from life? The infinite that opens? Neither happiness nor misfortune. Neither the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this ineffable feeling changed what remained from existence. As if death outside of him could now only collide with death within him. 'I'm alive. No, you're dead.'”⁷

I will speak here of fragility. You may have other words to name this feeling of absolute distress, of immersion in a situation where the unpredictable disorients all control. You may prefer to speak of “vulnerability”, “precariousness”, or even “submission”. In all these terms resonates something of our passivity, of our being-affected, of a form of undergoing. I prefer the term "fragility" because it reflects the fundamentally friable nature of my being. *Fragilis* in Latin, this is whom can be broken, whom is “fallible” as the philosopher Paul Ricœur also says, whom has become aware of one’s flaw, whereby there is an active recovery of this passive affection. I prefer to speak of fragility because this experience seems to me more universal, at least in comparison with the contemporary use of other terms which name this fundamental passivity, and which designate social or political categories of people: “vulnerable” people, in

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Instant de ma mort*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1994, p. 10.

Levinas's case, widows, orphans,⁸ or today the elderly, or people with chronic illnesses⁹; "precarious" people are, in Hans Jonas' words the living beings exposed to the risk of death, namely plants and animals,¹⁰ people who live below the poverty line, or whose occupation exposes them to hunger; "submissive" people are typically slaves... or women.¹¹

Thus, in this context of absolute weakening/embrittlement of being, even the usually operative supports of meditation or prayer have become meaningless for me. As if they were still too much "artefacts", time formats dedicated to meeting, predetermined for my well-being, as the sociologist Frédéric Lordon analyzes the ambiguous goal of the meditation sessions offered to employees in companies.¹² A pre-formatted time, supposedly of return to oneself, ultimately intended to make productivity at work even more profitable. Isn't his new so-called "cognitive" capitalism even more manipulative (more insidiously) than the one Karl Marx early denounced in the 19th century?

In short, the current pandemic situation generates distress such that it makes inoperative (obscene?) dedicated meditation of prayer moments, abstractly cut off from a continuous daily rhythm which is only full of dull anxiety, worry, insecurity and instability. These moments cut off from the real real, separated from the real real, even framed into a "pre-meditation", a "post-meditationé"¹³ do they not paradoxically reproduce the

⁸ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au delà de l'essence* (1974), Paris, Le livre de poche, 1990.

⁹ Marie Garrau, *Politiques de la vulnérabilité*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2018.

¹⁰ H. Jonas, *The phenomenon of life*. Towards a philosophical biology (1966), Phoenix Editions, 1982 ; *Le phénomène de la vie*, Bruxelles, De Boeck Editions, 2001.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), Paris, Folio, 1976, et Manon Garcia, *On ne naît pas soumise, on le devient*, Paris, Flammarion, 2018.

¹² Frédéric Lordon, *Capitalisme, désir et servitude*, Paris, La Fabrique Editions, 2010.

¹³ Ch. Trungpa, *Meditation in action* (1970), Shambhala Editions, 2010, where the author stresses the inner link between meditation and postmeditation, and where he criticizes a still « fabricated » thought of the meditation ; K. Gamber, *Die Reform der römischen Liturgie*, Preface J. Ratzinger, Regensburg, F. Pustet, 1981, where the

abstraction, the disconnection which haunts our lives always on the brink of the dissociation of schizophrenia?

Hence this acute feeling of absurdity with regard to these very “tools”, which are insufficiently powerful here to generate any genuine reconnection, any true embodiment of my distressed self. What is left then? Maybe only the emergency of an “asceticism” as I said, of this pre-formatted liturgy, this technique offered to our biotech minds, or, to put it another way, the emergency of a deeper “épochè” (a suspension, a break of our surimposed preconceptions). The answer comes from a deeper place: freeing oneself from predetermined “formats”, “determined” moments, *a fortiori*, from their caricature: digital sessions of guided meditation, liturgies with zoom application, etc. The answer that comes is the face to face encounter between my distressed self and the absurdity of our situation and, as the Russian Orthodox Saint Silouane says magnificently: “hold your spirit in hell and do not despair.”¹⁴

What makes me “more alive” in this hellish, apocalyptic situation? More “living” as I chose to formulate it in the title of this presentation, rather than more “alive” as we commonly say. “Living”: this present participle indicates a process, the process of living, not a state or a being, as “alive” does: to be alive is to survive. How can we not be just “survivors” who anxiously await the signals of our imminent possible death, separated from ourselves, external to ourselves? How can we be “living”: from within?

These micro-moments that I named “Jouvernex” and “Waking up/Awakening” and that I self-interviewed a little bit earlier express the uncontrolled influx of life in me and they

latter questions the collapse of liturgy into a « show ». He writes : « It is not possible to ‘fabricate’ a liturgical movement – as less as you can ‘fabricate’ a living being – but you may be part of its development while becoming one with the spirit of the liturgy.”

¹⁴ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouane l’Athonite (1866-1938). Vie, doctrine, écrits*, Paris, Cerf, Abbaye de Belle Fontaine, First Part, chapter XI, 2016.

bodily express themselves from me through my respiratory dynamics, which constantly connects and regenerates in me the internal and the external.

This feeling of becoming more “living”. I have experienced it more viscerally, cardiacally and emotionally, — “cardially”¹⁵ if I can allow myself this neologism which refers to the fold of the heart and the affective — in these micro-moments when my rib cage my chest suddenly took the air in full lungs, swelled spontaneously under the influx of air (internal-external; passive-active: receptive?¹⁶). When I felt the increased inflow of air into my lungs, breathe in, breathe out... Involuntary breathing.¹⁷

By opening myself to the air flowing in me, I expose myself, I risk my life. Because, concretely, I could also at any time inhale the virus (these famous droplets, which remain in the air ...). But by risking my life, I win it back. I pass from the status of survivor to that of living. I am more alive at the heart of the risk I choose to take. Simone de Beauvoir magnificently expresses this tension with the heroines of Stendhal, who live by

¹⁵ N. Depraz, *La surprise du sujet : un sujet cardial*, Bucarest, Zeta books, 2018.

¹⁶ About the notion of « receptivity » (Rezeptivität), see E. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil, Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*. Redigiert und herausgegeben von Ludwig Landgrebe (1939), Hambug, Meiner, 1976, first section, « The structures de receptivity ».

¹⁷ About the spontaneous set into motion of the cardiac rhythm together with breathing for the newborn baby before any « neuronal emergence », see cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, pp. 191-192. The author speaks here of a « dynamique pré-neurale » in which the contractions of the cardiac muscle are responsible alone for the growth of the organism. See in this respect N. Depraz, T. Desmidt, « Cardiophenomenology : a refinement of neurophenomenology », *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, published online 9 august 2018 : <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-018-9590-y>, 4.3. « An Embryo-genetic argument : the heart as a key for the growth of the organism », p. 14 : « At nine and a half weeks, the principal aspects of the human electrocardiogram area present in the same way as in the adult state. Yet at this date, there is no nervous control of the heart. Gesell finds here Coghill’s ideas, and speaks of a ‘dynamic morphogenesis’ that would envelop the facts integrated or not by the nervous system. » (Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 197, american translation : *Nature. Course Notes from the College de France*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003, p. 148)

opening up to the unpredictable, the unforeseeable, the “surprising” dimension of reality:

“[It challenges] the very meaning of life, that of each and everyone. (...) A passionate and profound woman constantly revises the established values; she knows the constant tension of freedom without support; in this way, she constantly feels in danger: she can at any moment win everything, or lose everything. It is this risk assumed in the anxiety that gives its history the colors of a heroic adventure. And the stake is the highest: the very meaning of this existence which is the possession of each one, her only possession. Mina de Vanghel's aventure may in some sense seem absurd, but it involves an ethics.”¹⁸

Thus, becoming more “living” in time of pandemic is assuming one’s fragility (ones’ internal flaw). It is risking, exposing one’s identity and integrity. Researches from different fields, for example in immunology, psychology or politics, clearly show that “security” normativity is deadly. By exposing yourself, you immunize yourself; by transgressing, you discover ourselves; by engaging, you provoke transformations and by doing all this, you no doubt contribute to change the world and the others around us.¹⁹

¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, op. cit. vol. I (1949), p. 385.

¹⁹ About the concept of « risk » in phenomenology, see N. Depraz, « Vie et risque. Le végétal au risque du mouvement », *Alter. Revue de phénoménologie*, n°21 « La vie », Paris, Alter, 2012, pp. 51-71 : in ligne 01 june 2019, URL:<http://journals.openedition.org/alter/795> ; DOI : 10.4000/alter.795 ; about immunity in biology, see N. M. Vaz, F. J. Varela, “Self and Non-Sense: An Organism-Centered Approach to Immunology”, *Med Hypotheses*, May-Jun 1978, 4(3), pp. 231-67. DOI: 10.1016/0306-9877(78)90005-1 ; about the danger of security policies for the living beings there is a huge literature on the subject. See for example : “Ulrich Beck et la théorie du risque”, [http://www.ffsa.fr/webffsa/risques.nsf/b724c3eb326a8defc12572290050915b/84dd4090d2263ce0c12573ec0042ec82/\\$FILE/Risques_50_0025.htm](http://www.ffsa.fr/webffsa/risques.nsf/b724c3eb326a8defc12572290050915b/84dd4090d2263ce0c12573ec0042ec82/$FILE/Risques_50_0025.htm), “Les risques de l’hypersécurité”, *Marianne*, 27 février 2015; <https://www.lemondepolitique.fr/dossiers/securite-et-liberte>. As a pioneer reference, U. Beck, *Das Risiko Gesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Berlin, Surhkamp, 1986.