

Pandemic – ‘A Completely Normal Chaos of Risk and Fear’

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The Unprecedented?

The new infectious disease that was bandied about among the public in late December of 2019 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization(WHO) in just a few months. If we put aside the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic was the third WHO pandemic declaration, the current situation for us living in the present may seem unprecedented in the history of mankind. Such impression is true in a way and yet false on the other hand. “Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.”¹⁾

This remarks of WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus made at the media briefing on Covid-19 on March 11, 2020, includes several concepts to be contemplated in this article. Each component of the ‘pandemic’ ‘declaration’ that Dr. Tedros deliberated is not of much significance in this article. My interest lies in the large-scale infectious disease phenomenon itself, the social response and its aftermath. The pandemic is still ongoing, but the experience so far seems sufficient to look back on the pandemic and society's response.

State of Exception?

The measures implemented in the name of preventive measures against epidemics in

1) <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

various countries are clearly restrictions on the basic rights of freedom, which are recognized as rights and legally established particularly in the modern West. These restrictions inevitably have a broad impact on the formation of the triple relations, namely the relationships of one with nature, with others, and with oneself, one with other beings (social-related), and one with oneself (self-related). This is because the imperative of preventive measures against epidemics seems to admit of no exceptions to everyday life, not to mention career activities.

While it is natural that the problem philosopher Agamben continuously has brought up against this backdrop is bound to be controversial in the Western context, it may also serve as a clue that may cast light on our situation. The key aspect of his point is the protest against the widespread reservation imposed on the basic system of freedom, which forms the basis of Western society since the Modern Age. Given that liberal basic rights are a widely recognized value system in Western society, the political measures that hold back those rights in the form of administrative order even without clear legal support are expected to be subject to criticism. For Agamben, the current COVID-19 situation is practically the same as dedicating bios (qualified life) to Leviathan's altar in the name of protecting zoe (bare life), and the state of exception has become a normal paradigm for governance. In a constitutional state, the state of exception is a paradoxical situation in the sense that the law includes neutralization of the effects of the law and that the legal system is equipped with a device that stops its operation. In this sense, it is reasonable to point out that a society where emergencies persist neither is a free society nor can be called a constitutional state. Agamben's insight deserves to be called an operation of a sort of 'dialectic of life'. As a result of accepting the comprehensive constraints of free daily life under the categorical imperative that biological life must be maintained, the answer to the question of 'what is the life maintenance for?' - namely, the independent life as the purpose of life itself - is denied, and consequently, what life is for becomes questionable again. It is a paradox in which the pursuit of self-preservation leads to self-destruction.

In that the Hobbesian option 'to make war or peace' imposes absolute sacrifices to ensure safety and peace, it is no longer an option that can be offered in modern democratic systems, no matter how threatening the virus may be. Agamben's sharp perspective in observing the COVID-19 situation is a consistent reflection of his philosophy. Truth is revealed not on average, but rather in exaggeration. As can be seen in frequent protests against quarantine measures, Agamben's concerns are no longer his and his alone. However, what Agamben overlooked was that the series of restrictions implemented over the past two years may have been based on

citizens' consent and support at the level above the line that he accepts. This type of critical perspective, despite the social critical motive from which it originated, underestimates the public rationality implied in citizens' acceptance of restrictions that are at times harshly imposed on their basic rights. Here, it is not irrelevant to the overall underestimation or even blindness about the achievement of modern democracy that Agamben's philosophy offers. If he intended not to be misunderstood as simply admonishing in the observational position of ideological criticism, the rational clarification and understanding of the origin of such support or sympathy, or at least acceptance or acquiescence should have preceded. COVID-19 is not just a disease. It is an exceptional infection deeply involved in psychological, ontological, and social dimensions. It is thus perceived by citizens, not because they are manipulated or ignorant. Their perception is not groundless. The theory must face reality, reality should not be tailored to the theory.

The Risk of COVID-19

Although it is not something to put forward, our experience with infectious disease is abundant. We have experienced infectious diseases that have spread on a small and large scale in recent years, perhaps with an exception of Ebola virus disease. Putting aside the flu that can be dealt with current vaccine or treatment or swine flu that were stabilized in a short period of time, if we place COVID-19 together with infectious diseases that have caused relatively large social repercussions such as SARS and MERS, the social shock caused by COVID-19 can be understood. Viruses themselves may not be produced by science and technology, but they share characteristics similar to radioactive risks caused by nuclear accidents in that they are sensorially imperceptible. However, while it is difficult to detect the danger of radioactivity in a short period of time without mobilizing technical devices, the results of viral infections can be generally confirmed through sensory perception within a few days.

Here I divide the risk concept into two to describe our attitude toward the risk of COVID-19. For the sake of my discussion, I transform Luhmann's distinction into decisive risk and objective risk. Unlike objective risk or danger(Gefahr), decisive risk(Risiko) contains possible damage as the result of a decision. Even in the same context, decisive risk and objective risk are distinguished by the difference in perspective and position related to the situation. For example, getting on

an airplane involves danger, but there is a difference between passengers and pilots. While the pilots carry out decisions that involve danger by flying the airplane under their own decisions, the passengers are exposed to the objective risks without exercising any decision as long as they are onboard.

In this context, COVID-19 shows a relatively high transmission rate and at the same time nonnegligible fatality rate. We, on the other hand, are exposed to the risk of infection without self-control of the risk due to the nature of COVID-19 that cannot be recognized by sensory perception. The nature of infectious diseases inevitably makes us aware of these risks, and the uncertainty and inability to dispose of these risks put a damper on our activities and amplify fear. On the other hand, the virus is objectively dangerous, but it is no threat as long as I stay in. If I decide to go out to play soccer with other people in the field, then I am taking the risk of getting infected (Risiko).

Of course, decisive risk would come to zero if we are completely cut off from the outside world, but this is impossible both practically and in principle. It is not possible to eliminate danger completely. Nor is it something absolutely negative to be eliminated. Trades through risky navigation promise high returns if successful. There can never be a zero risk as long as one acts and makes decisions that may cause damage. If the risk is zero, it is a stagnant state where no qualitative change is made. In a dynamic society, there must be progressive actions and decisions that take appropriate amount of risks. As long as humans make decisions, risks are a condition of human existence. Yet, excessive risk-taking can cause damage or injury, and complete risk aversion will lead to total lethargy. Therefore, the risks must be taken at an appropriate level.

This is basically the same with regard to COVID-19. If life must continue in the COVID-19 crisis, it should not be premised or aimed at complete avoidance or elimination of risks. Risks that can be endured must be taken. We have no choice but to get out of the house in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. This statement has nothing to do with the rumors that COVID-19 has a flu-like fatality rate or even mild symptoms that can pass by like the common cold, and should not be linked to the context of such discussion at all. Under these reservations, one should be wary of expanding the discourse of crisis or expecting a premature utopia of safety, either through excessive risk communication or complete blindness to the ontology of the risks. Contrary to these extremes, an enlightenment is required: one that faces up to the fact that risks are a condition of human existence and reveals the 'normality of risk'.

Where the Problem Lies

Therefore, it should be considered that the fear of COVID-19 from this risk perception creates the basis for the attitude of citizens to accept the government's quarantine measures in the COVID-19 crisis. It is inevitable that the general infection tends to have this trend. Especially in the case of COVID-19, due to its relatively high transmission rate and nonnegligible fatality rate, it is detected as a situation with a greater risk in some ways than MERS, which showed a relatively higher fatality rate. The logic of citizens' perception of risks played a role in enduring widespread restrictions on basic rights and even some quarantine measures that undermine human dignity in extreme cases.

Assuming these circumstances, the following issue that Agamben posed is now justified and should be taken seriously: "[...] how easily an entire society surrendered to the feeling of its being plague-ridden and accepted self-isolation and the suspension of its normal life conditions: its work relations and friendships, its connections to loved ones and to its religious and political beliefs."(G. Agamben, *Where are we now?*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, p. 23) As a result, Agamben basically discusses the obstacles found in the above-mentioned relations one has to the nature, to others and to oneself, and then mentions the problems concerning the decision of sanctions and the process and procedure of their enforcement as well. The first issue relates to infringement of all areas of our lives, and the second issue relates to the problem of our democratic decision-making. However, we must not jump straight from this awareness to the overall criticism of the destruction of democracy, new totalitarianism or state of exception. Instead, the focus of criticism should lie on free operation of citizens' public sphere, decision-making procedures of institutions of public deliberation and the legitimate execution of administrative power. Through this process, we must question and protest the loss of dignified life and death - being restricted from what may be the last encounter with our loving family and being unable to stay by the deathbed or even properly lament over one's death. In this circumstance, the "colonization of the lifeworld"(Habermas) may be a more appropriate conceptualization than the state of exception.

Communication of Fear and Anxiety

Just as the specificity of the risks accompanied by the general infectious disease does, the risks of COVID-19 tend to drive the public to a specific state of mind. Here, I distinguish the public perception of the risks of COVID-19 through Heidegger's concepts of fear and anxiety and I am interested only in the difference limited to the object relevance of these concepts. Fear is always fear of something threatening. Heidegger's depiction: "As something threatening, what is harmful is not yet near enough to be dealt with, but it is coming near. As it approaches, harmfulness radiates and thus has the character of threatening."(M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. by J. Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 2010, §30) brings up the image of a deadly virus attack. On the other hand, anxiety is not targeted at anything that exists in the world. What we are anxious about is not a specific object in the world, but rather our own existence in relation to the world. In other words, the object of our anxiety is the world itself as a whole and the loss of its meaning.

From this perspective, infections such as COVID-19 are inherently easy to transform fear to anxiety due to their risk characteristics and infectiousness. What is more, the distinct specificity of COVID-19 mentioned above further accelerates this transformation. The transition to a pandemic crisis indicates the point where fear turns into anxiety, and WHO Director-General's hesitance indicates the consciousness of this anxiety.

While an intentional response is not easy in case of communication of anxiety, communication of fear can be dealt with. This is because anxiety is an experience of the unrest of the world itself, whereas fear is about a specific object within the world. You cannot ultimately avoid the unrest of the earth or ground in an earthquake unless you leave the Earth. While COVID-19 is an object in the world, the COVID-19 crisis can be amplified into the world's own unrest. If so, it is evident that the socio-psychological and cognitive response to the COVID-19 incident should be a measure that induces the reverse of this transformation. Anxiety should be transformed back into fear, which is an emotion tied up with an object, so that we can call our attention back to the specific problems.

Just like communication inflation, communication deflation brings unnecessary or unwanted consequences. The overstatement and understatement lead to different developments and consequences. The inflation of risks communication drives fear into anxiety, resulting in

the loss of the world. The deflation of risks communication converts decisive risks to objective risks, resulting in a crisis. The two paths may seem to lead to opposing poles, but the poles are connected. Inflation and deflation are similar in their effects. Either way is not the way we should take.

Social Rationality

Due to the nature of the 'scientific' knowledge system, science and medicine face a lack of knowledge from the lack of time, data and reference in the face of 'new' infections. Thus, it is difficult to have an expert in a strict sense, especially in the early stages of the spread of the infection. Even the virus experts cannot foresee the advent of COVID-19, and not all infection experts are experts in COVID-19. It is impossible to accurately predict all possible effects and side effects of the use and application of modern science and technology intervening in nature. Likewise, no one can accurately predict the trends of response to COVID-19, situational variation and response to such variation at this point. In this state, the response to COVID-19 should not be entirely entrusted to 'scientific rationality', nor should it be delegated to political debates and bureaucratic decisions by administrative officials. 'Social rationality' is required in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Justification will be given to the selective quarantine measures only when the social pains they inevitably bring about are publicly discussed and deliberated.

Concerns and Expectations

There is no doubt that our relatively fine transmission rate and fatality rate through the COVID-19 crisis has been a combined result of several factors such as the universal health care system, the quarantine system supplemented through infectious diseases in recent years, the citizens' voluntary compliance with quarantine measures and responsibility and work ethics of people directly or indirectly involved in preventive measures, including medical staffs, nurses and rescue workers who have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis. However, apart from this

achievement, it seems necessary to evaluate the quantitative relationship between the size of the casualties and the human and material resources invested in responding to COVID-19. For instance, problems such as the reality of labor where one has to risk his or her life in the daily working field and the industrial accidents are already well known (cf. the front page of Kyunghyang newspaper dated November 21, 2019, which included the names of 1,200 labor workers who died in fatal accidents in construction projects over the past year and nine months at the time). If these issues are addressed with the same alertness and determination as in the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the safe return of industrial workers and their home safety will be ensured at a remarkably higher rate. This imbalance in willingness to practice and allocate resources may be a side effect of the risks and fears of infection and inflation of related communication. Excessive communication of COVID-19 swallows other social problems, ending up making an inefficient use of limited social competencies or causing side effects of neglecting other repeating risks that would otherwise be easily controlled.

According to Beck who imprinted the concept of a "risk society", modern industrial society has become a risk society. While the distribution of wealth forms the front of confrontation in industrial society, the distribution of risks is the key in the risk society. Risks are democratic. Even the rich are not safe from radioactive fallout caused by nuclear power plant accidents or air pollution caused by yellow dust or fine dust. However, this statement may be theoretically correct, but it is already refuted in reality. The rich have built private air defenses and air purifiers have long become a home necessity as long as we can afford them. The intensity of the damage caused by COVID-19 varies greatly depending on the social class and occupational group. Aside from vaccines, people around the world who do not even have access to face masks are bound to be exposed to a high risk of infection. This is because the risks of COVID-19 is distributed unevenly in the global society depending on the country's economic power, effective and efficient response of the political system, the operation of the health care system, and citizens' responsibility ethics.

With the prolonged COVID-19 crisis, internal pressure raised by the intensification of contradiction already inherent in (world) society and the preventive measures that have widely penetrated people's triple societal relations looks for a weak link for decompression. What is bad is not the fact that the concealed problem has become visible, but the fact that the 'overdetermination' caused by COVID-19 clouds the actual points at issue. Racism, Western/Eastern, and the gap between the rich and the poor etc, the list can go on. It has already become a reality in which the inner "revolt of nature"(Horkheimer) suppressed from the collapse of daily

life seeks alternative scapegoats, and this is another threat to be wary of.

Amidst the catastrophic COVID-19 crisis, there is a positive signal, albeit the uncertainty of its effectiveness – a signal that I might call ‘the backside effect’ of the ‘pan’demic that WHO Director-General was hesitant to declare. COVID-19 taught us that we already live in a globalized world and that pandemic is a global event that can only be responded at the global social level. We knew that we lived in a world society, but we experienced this fact ‘by ourselves’ through the pandemic. What we gained from COVID-19 is an old novelty. Whether it is like Einstein’s finite but borderless universe, living in globus in the Kantian sense that we cannot live infinitely scattered and cannot help but to give our sides in the end has become a reality. Now there remain several questions that cannot be addressed at this moment. It is a matter of practice rather than a matter of theory, and it will only be answered in time.

Let’s put aside the sublime ethics of interpreting the COVID-19 situation as the limitation of the civilized way of life so far and urging a great transition to ‘completely different thing’, say an ecological way of life. Instead, let’s just think of the possibility of change that can be expected in the current conditions of the world. Will the ‘world risk society’ enable the ‘world civil society’(Kant) as Beck anticipates? Will the world risk society deliver the following to us?: In principle, risks are not separated from the individuals producing risks and subjects to those risks. In other words, risks cannot be externalized to other people or area, and contain a ‘boomerang effect’ in that individuals producing risks are not free from them. Will the ethics of solidarity from the approval of the fact that ‘we are all on the same boat, living in the world society’ be settled as a common value system? With regard to COVID-19, wouldn’t COVID-19 come and go between epidemic and pandemic if there was no global social solidarity that provides vaccination infrastructure including vaccine supply to the Third World countries?

Author Introduction

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