



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

**With the emergence of the “Corona Phenomenon”,
what aspects of the idea of modern subject have
become more visibly problematic?**

Chouraqui, F.; Mossleh, P.

Citation

Chouraqui, F. (2022). With the emergence of the “Corona Phenomenon”, what aspects of the idea of modern subject have become more visibly problematic? In P. Mossleh (Ed.), *Corona Phenomenon: philosophical and political questions* (pp. 61-68). Leiden: Brill. doi:10.1163/9789004512924_008

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3480125>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

With the Emergence of the “Corona Phenomenon”, What Aspects of the Idea of Modern Subject Have Become More Visibly Problematic?

Frank Chouraqui

The “Corona Phenomenon” is ongoing, and we may expect that it will receive a new definition as it recedes into the past. That future definition will most likely seem more reliable than any we could come up with at the moment. It will certainly emphasize some of the aspects that we may or may not be able to identify at present and de-emphasize others, but which ones these are, we cannot predict. Provisionally, this pleads in favor of a broader and inevitably more vague definition of the phenomenon. It seems uncontroversial that such a definition will address at least the following four dimensions: an embodied-medical one, a socio-political one, an economical one, and an existential one. In other words, and regardless of details that remain open to discussion, it is a phenomenon that affects all dimensions of the modern subject.

In turn, there are two ways to think of the modern subject. The first way associates it with a certain intellectual movement and thinks of the subject in substantial terms. It appeals to the conceptual innovations that have marked the modern age, from the integrity of the cogito in Descartes (Ricoeur, 1992, 14), to the corporate designation of the free subject in Hobbes and Locke (Picciotto, 2009), the universalization of the subject as citizen in Rousseau or the transcendental bearer of duties in Kant. The other envisages the modern subject as the form of life that inhabits modernity. It, therefore, considers the subject in constructivist terms. This is a line taken by Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault among others. This dual approach leads us to ask how we are to cash out the consonances and dissonances between the two and how either of them interacts with the “Corona Phenomenon”.

If we are to ask how the “Corona Phenomenon” does the theoretical work of bringing out some underlying problems in modern subjectivity, we must therefore address the constructivist notion of the modern subject as a point of convergence of institutions as well as the substantialist notion of the human as a unified, and universalizable entity. What follows can only be very sketchy, preliminary, and vague. It is also inevitably tainted by my own, western experience. In particular, it pays outsize attention to the consequences of the

Corona-experience for a battery of democratic concepts such as the separation of the public and the private, the existential consequences of capitalism, or the fantasies related to the nation-state. Yet, of course, this is a phenomenon whose geographical spread far exceeds the turf in which such concepts are operative at all. I hope this bias can be blamed on the fog that is an intrinsic part of the Corona phenomenon, although I suspect, this is too convenient an explanation.

1

So, the modern subject has an institutional or corporate dimension: subjects are caught up in a field of relations with each other which is mediated by historically localized institutions, including economic, political, and healthcare institutions, and this network of relations constitutes the lifeworld of the subject and determines the nature of our existence. In this sense, asking about the viability of the modern notion of subjectivity involves asking about the viability of the modern life-world in general. Now, how does the current crisis question this institutional world? I think the main relevant remark one can make here is that it threatens the organic cohesion of this institutional world, by slackening the links between these four dimensions: modernity presupposes that the boundaries and the claims of the political, the economical, the medical, and the existential are fixed, legitimate and objectively justified. In Coronatimes, these boundaries are no longer fixed or recognized, but rather, they are contested, and subject to redefinition. The Corona-crisis places pressure on what we thought was a reliable harmony between them, one ultimately grounded in human nature.

Take the relations between *economics* and *health*: the promised synergy between the two, which was both the grounds of the capitalistic promotion of *big pharma* as well as the underlying presupposition according to which health and prosperity cannot conflict (since they are both components of the welfare of the unified, nuclear modern subject) is, to say the least, renegotiated: we protect our health by impairing the economy, so goes the rationale for lockdowns and other measures as presented by state agents. And this renegotiation is in most cases left up to the arbitration of *politics*, whose function is now no longer to *synergize* but to *arbitrate* between the two, hitherto conflicting, demands. As I shall outline below this leads to renewed pressure on the relations between individual and collective welfare. To return to subjectivity, one can conclude that in a context in which the relations between the four stakeholders are to be redefined, the subject is now transformed into a negotiator

and a decision-maker (or as I shall argue below, a hermeneutic agent) when she was meant to be fully accounted for as a universal agent.

In this sense, we could say that the “Corona Phenomenon” exposes the instability and the conflicting vocations of four of the cardinal structures of modern life, and beyond this, it threatens the modern narrative of a unified subject, a universal human world, and the unity of individual and universal will through the rational agency.

2

If we now move from the material to the substantialist notion of modern subjectivity, it seems again we must begin with empirical tensions as markers of conceptual shortcomings. I see three such families of tensions:

2. 1. First, the conflict between public health and personal health. This is a problem that has a number of ramifications. Much of the daily subjective experience of living in Coronatimes has to do with second-guessing, critical interpretation, and risk-assessment. Are the directives coming from governments and local authorities legitimate? Are they sufficient to protect me or should I create further guidelines for myself? Should I take the liberty to ignore some of them? How much can I trust that others stick to such guidelines? Am I in a special category that requires further care? Am I being a better citizen by getting tested or by avoiding being tested? Do I owe health to myself or to another, or to society? All of these questions presuppose a certain discrepancy between collective and individual welfare: we are well aware that the guidelines that protect collective welfare do not automatically protect individual welfare, and the individual is left to arbitrate the competing claims of the individual and the collective. This cuts deep into the legitimizing discourses of the State in the modern age by questioning one of its founding presuppositions: that the good of the individual and the good of the community are aligned. This is a presupposition that animates much of the modern literature, most systematically in Kantian deontology and its scaling up model (see for example Wren, 2002): generalization to the universalization of maxims at the highest level determines the validity of specific given instantiations at the bottom level.

2. 2. The second point is related to the previous. Living in Coronatimes involves the necessity to interact with an invisible (always) and absent (often) threat. This leads to anxiety of two kinds.

2. 2. 1. First: and following on the above, it leads to a conflict of allegiances between individuals and group, giving rise to several types of subjectivities, each of which will be regarded as deviant from a modern perspective: their

place in the crisis comes to define their place in society, and therefore it violates the notion of an abstract interchangeable citizen. It places vulnerable populations like the elderly or the obese in a certain position, the young in another, the carers in yet another. This also leads to the stigmatization of those whose individual needs place a greater burden on the others and encourages talk of the desert when certain groups suffer from greater exposure through perceived negligence. Against a cliché that has been repeated in the early stages of the pandemic, and in spite of the modern fantasy that surely motivated it: COVID-19 is not the great equalizer, it is the great differentiator. In short, this is a situation that creates micro- or sub-identities that conflict with the abstract and universal notion of the modern subject, and with its cognate normative view that only such abstract definition has its place in the public sphere.

2. 2. 2. This first kind of anxiety is differentiating, and it confronts the pandemic subjects with their own singularity. This leads to the second form of anxiety which has to do with an ambivalent experience of significance. Once social differentiation is institutionalized, each individual is left to their own devices: the rules are by nature general, and they therefore only apply to an abstract and generalizable subject. Yet, in a society reorganized by a biological concern, this means that the rules apply to an abstract and generalizable *body*, which is a contradiction. What the pandemic requires of us, therefore, is that we interact *directly* as owners of this or that body with the dangers associated with the virus and with the rules put in place. Interaction with the virus, when mediated by the law, will be insufficient, or rather, choosing to interact with the virus only by abiding by regulations is itself seen as a personal choice; one that ignores the aforementioned differentiations. As a consequence, each individual is left with the task of stopping the virus in the context of their own singular life. This heightens the sense of consequence of our life: the difference between life and death passes through our everyday actions. At the same time, this heightened sense of significance is matched by a heightened sense of insignificance: our life is threatened and subject to randomness and to the whims of our neighbors. As a result, the level of meaning in our life is exposed to the extent that the level of meaninglessness is exposed too. As a consequence, each individual is left to their own devices when it comes to interpreting the specific constellation between rules, information (mediated by different levels of trust), our own bodily identity, and the demands of the current situation. “Should I go to the supermarket?” now carries with it a heightened hermeneutic dilemma. As I will try to briefly sketch out below, increased pressure on interpretation conflicts with some of the ideals of agency in an age of enlightenment.

2. 3. This leads to a third point: The variety of responses to the crisis is polarized by anxiety on one end of the spectrum and dismissiveness on the other (the latter is often coupled with conspiracy theories). This puts pressure on two ambivalences contained in the modern notion of subjectivity:

2. 3. 1. The first is the ambivalent notion of life and of the subject as principle 'of' life: in one sense the modern subject is regarded as a principle that *provides* life through meaning-giving. This appeals to a qualitative notion of life and builds the subject into an animating and creating principle. This is a tendency encapsulated in the hubristic tradition of modernity (Peguy, 2001): it is the human that replaces and transcends the natural basis of their life, and historically, in so doing, it takes over from God. Only the human creates a human world. Paradoxically, a tendency such as this, which is in the literal sense, humanistic, constitutes the basis of current Coronascepticism, and the inability to take the threat of the virus seriously: the fantasy according to which the human cannot be destroyed by the non-human, seems to be in the background of the argument made by Coronasceptics (and with the climate science deniers and others). Often, the rejection of the legal restrictions is expressed in terms of life: "we have to go on living". Of course, it is also in the name of life that said restrictions are set in place too: in the material and medical sense of life this time, the restrictions are life-preserving, not life-threatening (they do threaten life taken in other senses: economic life, nightlife, sex life, and social life in some cases). The source of these paradoxes, as is visible, is the ambivalence in the notion of life promoted by the discourse of modernity: a double discourse that makes the human subject both a *creator* of life as meaning and a *discoverer* of life as biological object, making the modern notion of subjectivity one that both dominates and is dominated by nature. The ambiguous response to the virus that we are witnessing seems to reveal these two tendencies and the impossibility of finding a balance between them, pulling the modern notion of the subject at the seams.

2. 3. 2. The second kind of ambivalence is the modern ambivalent relation to meaning-making. This ambivalence is in turn illustrated by two points.

The first concerns the relations of meaning and truth. In a modern framework, interpretation aims at both meaning and truth indiscriminately; that is, modernity identifies meaning with the truth. As a consequence, it abusively identifies "living by" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2008; Midgley, 2003)¹ (which is the human response to meaning) with "believing" (which aims at the truth). The upshot is the following: as per the discourse of modernity, we can only live

¹ See also Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Garelli, 1992.

by what we believe. In underdetermined situations such as the current crisis, where the lack of information and knowledge is only matched by the importance and urgency to act upon it, this leads either to paralysis (the impossibility to “live by” anything) or to arbitrary belief (in the form of conspiracy theories). Enters ambivalence, therefore: arbitrary belief seems to be a natural consequence of the modern ban on arbitrary belief. Such arbitrary belief, although it would take much more space to demonstrate, lies at the root of the conspiracy theories that surround the Coronacrisis.

The second point concerns the modern account of the order in which belief, action, and meaning are to be organized. In the modern framework, belief precedes meaning, and action follows. Call this cognitivism: we respond to the world on the basis of what we believe to be true, and not on the basis of the meaning we assign to events and entities. The fact that *x* means *y* to me so does the story, only polarizes my actions if I entertain a truth-belief about *x* (at least, that it exists) and about *y* (at least that it picks up objective properties of *x*). There is increasing phenomenological evidence that this is a distorted account of experience (Deigh, 1994). The Coronacrisis not only offers some supplementary such evidence (we live by what the virus means to us much more than by what we know of it—hence the conspiracy theories surrounding it) but further, it confronts us with the contradictions latent in the modern notion of agency which is bound up with the notion of autonomy. Autonomy, as Kant famously spells it out, is a kind of freedom indistinguishable from obedience (Curtler, 1979). It is also the only appropriate kind of freedom and the modern subject is an agent only insofar as their actions are autonomous: actions that obey the moral Law (Ibid.). So, this is a notion of agency that equally bans arbitrariness and apathy. In other words, we return to the point made above: the modern subject is an agent who must act (against apathy) but must not act arbitrarily. Rather, she must only act by applying a rule that she is not the source of. Yet the Coronacrisis forces us to interpret more than we are entitled to, and this excess cannot be justified or unjustified fully. Unlike the modern notion of agency, the Coronatimes require a form of agency irreducible to autonomy, or the application of any rules: it presents us with a fundamentally indeterminate yet highly morally relevant field of action which demands individual action and the exercise of hermeneutic freedom (Lacour, 2016).

The Coronacrisis, like any contingent phenomenon, can only throw into starker light a number of conceptual fissures that were visible, but overlooked, thus far. One of the core concepts that is thus being challenged by the crisis we are now experiencing is the modern concept of subjectivity. It seems that the collision between this concept and the current crisis is threefold: first, the institutional notion of subjectivity presupposes a harmony between the internal

and external definitions of the individual, which is being currently tested; secondly, it presupposes a harmony between collective and individual welfare that is also challenged currently in the guise of the tensions between public and individual health; and finally (and probably consequently), the modern paradigm presupposes a treatment of the human relation to meaning whose naivety is now on full display: in particular, the investment by modernity in the rejection of arbitrariness has brought along the rejection of hermeneutic freedom and hermeneutic decision-making. The renewed sense of individual and context-dependent responsibility that comes with the fact of being a potential victim, potential carrier and potential rampart against the spread of the virus brings with it renewed focus on hermeneutic freedom. In so doing, it opens up a zone of conflict between the subject caught up in a pandemic and the subject as portrayed and illustrated by the modern paradigm. Finally, this provides us with an angle to understand the social pathologies that accompany the spread of the virus, such as conspiracy theories, as attempts to avoid facing the defeat of the modern model. The pandemical subject is worked through with tensions between their private and public duties, their commitment to an objective and a qualitative notion of life, the need for circumspection, and the necessity to face the emergency of now, at the risk of making arbitrary hermeneutic choices. Modern subjectivity bet everything on the hope that these divides would never take pre-eminence. The pandemic, among other current events, is proving it wrong.

References

- Curtler, Hugh Mercer (1979), "Freedom and Civil Obedience", in *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 14, No. 2: 153–163.
- Deigh, John (1994), "Cognitivism in the Theory of Emotions", in *Ethics*, Vol. 104, No. 4: 824–854.
- Garelli, Jacques (1992), "Voir ceci et voir selon", in Marc Richir et Etienne Tassin (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty, phénoménologie et expériences*, Paris: Jérôme Millon: 79–99.
- Lacour, Philippe (2016), "Le jugement et salogique dans la philosophie de Ricoeur", in *Ricoeur Studies*, Vol 7, No 2: 187–199.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (2008), *Metaphors We Live by*, University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964) "Eye and Mind", in *The Primacy of Perception*. Edited by James M. Edie, Northwestern University Press.
- Midgley, Mary (2003), *The Myths We Live by*, London: Routledge.
- Peguy, Charles (2001), *Temporal and Eternal*, Indianapolis: Liberty Press.

- Picciotto, Joanna (2009), "The Public Person and the Play of Fact", in *Representations*, Vol. 105, No. 1, 85–132.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1992), *Oneself as Another*, Translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press.
- Wren T. (2002) Cultural Identity and Personal Identity, in A.W. Musschenga, W. van Haaften, B. Spiecker, M. Slors (eds.), *Personal and Moral Identity*, Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy, Vol. 11, Dordrecht: Springer.