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The Virus of Oblivion

A nearby war. Weather anomalies. Inflation. Cyberattacks waged by Internet trolls. A whole litany of worries and fears – made even worse by the latest generation of artificial intelligence, which humanity had so far thought would be an ally. Will it soon take away our jobs, eliminate human creativity, take over the world? All in all, a sense of security certainly seems to be a very scarce commodity in these uncertain times.

But let's recall how hopeless a situation we found ourselves in just three years ago – not fully aware of what the worldwide pandemic crisis would entail for

humanity. Who could have guessed (not even the most eminent experts were then making such predictions) that an inconspicuous virus would swiftly kill nearly 10 million people worldwide, drive numerous companies into bankruptcy, and coop us all up in our homes for months on end? The pandemic made it painfully clear – irrespective of wars and economic crises, the pace of scientific development or the advancement of medicine – that a sense of secure health is among the most crucial factors in everyone's life. Losing that sense has consequences that we simply do not realize when there seems to be nothing to fear.

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread rapidly in Europe in the early spring of 2020, a chart was already circulating online, showing the recently released 2019 Global Health Security Index ranking. The report evaluated the ability of 195 countries to confront outbreaks of infectious diseases. Was it because it was prepared by American experts from the John Hopkins Center for Health Security that the United States ranked first and the United Kingdom second? Poland ranked 32nd, China came in 51st, and most African countries brought up the rear. The subsequent real response to COVID-19 verified these abstract ratings. The chaotic responses of the US and UK governments proved to be among the worst. It turned out that in order to effectively respond to such a virus, a country had to be prepared in advance, have potential scenarios laid out and have warehouses full of protective gear, medical equipment and, preferably, virological tests, vaccines, and drugs. In the case of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, meeting this last demand obviously required some time to find the right tools for diagnosing infection (in the form of tests), providing protection (vaccines), and delivering targeted treatment. However, all this was achieved much more quickly than for similar threats of the past – such as HIV and AIDS, for example. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have caused even more damage, is fortunately slowly petering out (as the WHO is set to confirm later this year by formally declaring it over).

Does this mean that we will revert to a sense of unthreatened safety, like before the pandemic? Will we again treat all infections carelessly and forget the rules that applied during the lockdown (don't leave



Rafał Olbiński, "Safe Distance"

home with symptoms of a cold, wear a mask during larger gatherings, wash your hands often, sneeze into a bent elbow)? It's time to decide: will we go back to our old habits, disregarding the need for cautious co-existence with dangerous viruses? And more globally: will we start taking care not to disturb their natural breeding grounds?

Because of widespread trading of food products between ecologically distant regions of the world and, above all, the intensive exploitation of the natural environment, as many as 70 percent of all infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin. Pathogens are circulating in the ecosystem much more quickly, partly due to ill-considered actions on the part of mankind that contribute to the decay of natural ecosystems.

How are infections and ecosystems related? Urbanization and high population growth are among the main causes of deforestation. The West's insatiable appetite for high-quality exotic timber and growing demand for food are also accelerating the destruction of natural wildlife. Mass tourism has also become a part of the plundering economy. The ambition to take a selfie on a pristine island first by a few, then by a few dozen, and finally by a few hundred Instagram users eventually prompts tour operators to decide to build a grand hotel in a formerly seldom-visited location, attracting in even larger throngs of tourists. Tourism provides a source of livelihood for local communities, but wild animals – such as bats, which are reservoirs of coronaviruses – are forced to move out of their natural territories. They end up foraging in areas much smaller than before, forced to coexist with species they had never naturally come into contact with. Moreover, they often live in close proximity to humans (typically not having anywhere else to go), becoming targets for hunting, trading, and even just plain entertainment. And in the process, they become another nexus of infections, caused by germs that had previously lived far from humans. This shortening of ecological distance facilitates the exchange of pathogens, and this always accelerates their evolution. Each of the major epidemics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – HIV, Ebola, SARS, MERS, avian flu, and more recently, SARS-CoV-2 – thus ultimately share a common source: violating the stability of local ecosystems.

As a result of globalization, the ecological barriers that previously occurred naturally have crumbled. Of course, older epidemics – the plague, cholera, leprosy – did decimate humanity back in times when no one spared a thought to how the plundering of natural resources that accompanies the advancement of civilization. It took the modern COVID-19 pandemic to remind people that such plagues do not materialize out of thin air – in fact, we largely create them for ourselves.



Back in 2018, when the WHO included a then-mysterious, unnamed “Disease X” on its list of greatest dangers to humanity, few people were concerned. Its grim diagnosis that the world lacked effective ways to prevent a major epidemic was also trivialized. The security of people’s health seemed so certain that no one was much concerned about infectious diseases; the focus was instead on the growing threat posed by diseases wrought by modern civilization itself: obesity, diabetes, and cancer.

It is now clear how perilous such an approach is. That’s why we cannot afford to be exclusively concerned about wars, natural disasters, and cyberattacks, while remaining oblivious to threats to global health security. Because one thing about viruses is that even when they are successfully defeated, they still continue to lurk in the environment, waiting to return sooner or later in another guise. ■

Rafał Olbiński,
“Subjective Destiny”