

**The Ontological-Existential Dimensions of Illness  
– Review<sup>1</sup> –**

*Cecília LIPPAI*

*Central European University, Budapest*

**Keywords:** illness, health, medicine, ontology, possibility, freedom

**E-mail:** lippai\_cecilia@yahoo.com

\*

*How* many have ever asked themselves the question: what is illness? Not too many, in all probability, since the one who is healthy has other questions to ask, and the one who is ill, seeks to become healthy again as soon as possible. It seems therefore that it is precisely health that hides, conceals from us the philosophical nature of illness, namely, the ambition to openly investigate the nature and meaning of illness for us, living beings. This is the starting point of István Király V.'s latest book, *A betegség – az élő létlehetősége. Prolegoména az emberi betegség filozófiájához* (Illness – A Possibility of the Living Being. Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Human Illness) (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2011), 200 p.

The title already concisely formulates the basic idea of the book, namely that illness pertains to us, living and feeling people, as one of our fundamental possibilities referring to, and sending towards, our being. Some might find this presupposition suspicious, but in order to make it accessible, transparent, and understandable in its complexity and depth, one must join the author in questioning and contemplation. Why and how can illness become a philosophical subject? How does it concern us and in what sense is illness ours? What is the original, Aristotelian meaning of possibility, a concept turned trivial and empty with too much use? How can we best understand our possibilities, and what is the significance of this understanding? These and similar questions guide the meditations of István Király V., inviting the readers to join the quest.

In an age when shadows, mud, juices, and oil companies all have their individual “philosophies”, why would one find it strange that somebody might investigate in all seriousness and openness the true philosophical nature of illness? Perhaps precisely because amidst the fake philosophies swarming around us, it questions something which concerns us in our being, and which, let’s face it, we try to avoid on account of its being uncomfortable and inconvenient. Despite our knowledge of illnesses more profound than ever before, we very rarely try to understand the real nature or existential importance of illness. We have delegated (or obtruded) any kind of discussion of illnesses to medicine. And indeed, medicine is the science of illnesses, and of course primarily of healing. However, could this

---

<sup>1</sup> István Király V.: *A betegség – az élő létlehetősége–Prolegoména az emberi betegség filozófiájához* (Illness – A Possibility of the Living Being. Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Human Illness) (Pozsony, [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2011), 200 p. ISBN 978-80-8101-499-4

mean that all of us, who approach the question of illness from outside medicine, are amateur dilettantes? Is it indeed solely “the experts” who can authentically treat the problem of illness? Is medicine capable at all of covering the entire problem of illness?

The book looks for answers to these questions in two organically connected chapters (*A betegség – az élő létlehetősége* [Illness – A possibility of the living being], *Betegség és szabadság* [Illness and freedom]). The core and foundation of the volume is the rethinking – or rather the refurbishing of the original meaning – of Aristotle’s concept of possibility.

Before turning to the brief presentation of the contents of these two chapters, first I must highlight one of the most important and boldest excursions of the book, which philosophically questions the falsities and destructiveness of “Christian healing”. The quotation marks are certainly not accidental here, as there are convincing arguments and examples for the author’s consideration that this expression is inherently contradictory. This is about a familiar, yet rarely thought-over and even more rarely expressed contradiction. Because for Christian thinking (quotation marks are haunting here as well) illness is a consequence of the original sin, and hence it is divine punishment. This should not even be such a great problem in itself, since it did not hinder pre-Christian, e.g. Jewish spirituality in practising healing. Christianity however rises the question that, insofar as illness is a rightful divine punishment, is any kind of resistance to it, namely curing-healing, not wrongful? Curing is, on the one hand, knowledge and science, which has never been a preferred endeavour of Christianity (István Király V. draws the attention that man ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, and this was his original sin). On the other hand, curing also opposes rightful divine punishment, becoming thus in fact heresy. And indeed, let us only think of the observation and persecution of physicians during the Christian Middle Ages. The result was that a 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century Christian physician often knew less about the human body and its illnesses than, say, his Egyptian colleague practising 2500 years earlier. If some illnesses were cured nonetheless, it could have happened only as divine miracle and mercy. However, while medicine still wanted to be part of the process of healing, “the medieval, and especially early medieval meaning of *medico* had so much shifted towards the meaning of *curo* – namely an indeed “positive” and *sui generis* Christian attitude and obligation, the nursing and attendance of the weak, the poor, and the sick – that it no longer means in fact “healing” in an (ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Hebrew, etc.) medical sense, but rather the caretaking of the sick and the suffering.” (p. 137)

One must unavoidably realize how deeply and fundamentally these Christian attitudes influenced the ideas and practices connected to illnesses. What is more, surely not only in a historical sense, but currently as well! How many times are physicians accused of the arrogance that they have “the complex of gods”, that is, they think of themselves as gods?

Returning now to the original line of thought, the book can be read also as a – successful – attempt to reclaim the thinking about illnesses from the “professionalized” discourses of medicine, psychology, sociology, etc., with their automatic use of technicized terminology, and at the same time also from the

pseudo-professional approaches of the ever-growing, fashion-imitating media publicity.

He warns us that we must undertake the serious confrontation with the universal and unavoidable experience of illness, as well as the ontological and existential stakes of this confrontation. No living being can be exempted from the experience of illnesses – this fact advances illness into one of the fundamental possibilities of our being. And as such, into a veritable philosophical question and subject. What is the reason, nevertheless, that so few philosophers have posed and continue to pose it as a question? The first chapter of the volume seeks the answer to this problem. First of all, philosophy traditionally rather deals with health. Similarly, we might add, philosophy equally prefers true to false, beautiful to ugly, or good to evil. Still, what is it that philosophy fails to do when, concentrating merely on health, leaves unrevealed the particular nature and stake of illness? When philosophy or the philosophers treat human confrontation with illnesses as a technical problem, delegating it to the all-time practice of healing, that is, all-time medicine, they are partly right. In a technical sense it is right, since healing is not the philosopher's job. But can philosophy be satisfied with this much? Can it be silent about a universal and existentially relevant experience such as illness? Can it compensate for its silence by discussing health? Can it overlook the fact that the being of man is always threatened and mostly unhealthy? Since if it was not the case, one could not consider it "vital" to be(come) healthy. Surely, philosophy must not and cannot turn away from the research of the true ontological-existential relevance of illnesses, even if health might seem as a subject "worthier" of its attention. Because philosophy assumes its questions not on account of their niceness and desirability, but their weight and problematic nature. The case is the same with the subject of illness, too. However, István Király V.'s purpose in this volume is not to criticize philosophy or to impute its failures, but an authentic philosophical questioning of, and thinking about, illness. Since illness is an unavoidable and life-threatening human experience, it is necessary to realize that the philosophy of illness must have an outstanding weight and relevance.

Nevertheless, thinking about illness has been and is still present in philosophy, albeit mostly as a "background", as the opposition and threat to health. It seems therefore that all-time philosophy agrees with all-time medicine about the need to primarily prevent, cure, and eliminate illnesses. At the same time, it is remarkable that, although the definition of health is hardly ever identical with the lack of illness (the author analyzes at this point the definition of the World Health Organization, according to which health means complete physical, spiritual, and social welfare), most often it is still outlined as a concept relative to illness, without, however, any attention being paid to the essential relationship of health and illness.

It must be settled in advance that this volume does not assume the task of offering a "correct" definition of illness, nor to inventory or amend the contradictions of previous definitions. Instead, it keeps on emphasizing that illness is an experience which pertains to us essentially, organizing and articulating our being. The author summarizes the task of the book as follows: illness "must be grasped and understood as an explicit, historically and factually outlining-organizing possibility organically and essentially pertaining – albeit with a

particular “negativity” – to human life and being, articulating it”. (p. 21.) It is about an experience and situation of being which essentially refers to us, in the course of our lives and relative to our abilities and possibilities of being.

Naturally, we approach illnesses primarily guided by the medical approach. Our age is defined in almost all its aspects by a widely accessible and mostly globalized science and within this, to a greater degree, medical science; it is unavoidable therefore not to relate through them. We might add that, while all this is still true, a much more dangerous and inauthentic publicity also increasingly gains ground: a pseudo-scientific, fashion-like health-cult and illness-quackery, perverted and familiarized by the media. It may well be precisely the dissatisfaction with medical sciences (which cannot “treat” the existential challenges of illnesses in their complexity) which chases publicity these days into ever more fearsome fashion-extremes. Everybody treats their real or supposed illnesses on the basis of the endless pseudo-options of the internet and turning to countless forms of pseudo-medicine (let us only think of the increasing popularity of homoeopathy, reviving obscure medieval quackeries. Well, the authentic philosophical approach of this book contrasts meaningful thinking with this Babel, and offers a valuable surplus in contrast with medical sciences. Firstly, the author repeatedly pinpoints that medicine rightfully has a central role in the human confrontation with illnesses. At the same time, he also emphasizes that it cannot cover all aspects and relations of illness – it needs therefore the openness of philosophical questioning aiming at comprehensiveness.

One of the basic thoughts and necessary realizations of the book is that man is not merely “ill” or “healthy”, but in the course of his being, he always experiences and carries within himself illness as a possibility – a particular possibility pertaining to the essence of his being. But how and in what respect is illness a possibility?

It may come as a surprise for many to understand illness as a possibility, since both philosophically and in everyday language, possibility is something which may happen just as well as it may not – it is only possible, and as such, it can be avoided, it is not necessary. Something which is not (yet) real, which is incomplete, unfulfilled, or – further on – probable, that is, more or less predictable. These latter, everyday meanings might even be valid for some illnesses, in some cases. But this is not what illness as a possibility means. István Király V. reclaims and radically returns the meaning of possibility from its erroneous meanings piled up throughout the centuries. Illness is, in his view, the possibility of the living being in such a fundamental sense that there could not be life without it.

The norm of life is health; however, not understood as some sort of ideal state, but as a possibility manifesting itself against the threatening possibilities of illnesses. Therefore, beyond all artificial or merely logical oppositions, both illness and health must be outlined as essential possibilities of the living being, for which reason István Király V. turns to Aristotle as a thinking partner for help.

Before I proceed to a brief sketch of the volume’s central and most voluminous part, the “dialogue-attempt with Aristotle”, I must make some philological and hermeneutic comments. The basis of István Király V.’s analysis of Aristotle is the ambition to grasp the Aristotelian ideas and concepts in their

originality, going beyond the many translations or mistranslations and misinterpretations. For this reason, he primarily uses the original Greek expressions, but also employs two Romanian translations of *Metaphysics*, judging these, despite their faults and shortcomings, more usable than the Hungarian translation. In this event, one may rightfully ask the question: to what extent must the reader of István Király V.'s book be an expert in Aristotle? I would venture to say: it might even help if he is to no extent. These thoughts “only” require the reader’s co-thinking, and this might even be to the advantage of the one who has no fixed, automatic interpretive reflexes about Aristotle. Since it is precisely against these that a possibility of meaning unfolds here which determines the basic idea of the volume, the meaning of illness as a possibility.

Why precisely Aristotle? Because, writes the author, in the context of such a philosophical meditation on illness, “for an inquisitive thinking aiming at understanding, it emerges as a requirement, albeit *trying* and *challenging*, to thoroughly examine the possibility “as such” with regard exactly to its *weight* – and not, as is customary, to its “weightlessness” and “insignificance”. (p. 148.)

Aristotle discusses possibility as *dynamis* and in the horizon of *dynamis*. The root of the word is *dynamai*, which means force, having force, or ability for something. It equally refers to physical and moral or social force, while at the same time to the ability of something to move, change, form – to become something else. As an ability to become something, *dynamis* sends to the *ousia*, the essence. In the sense that it is precisely the power and mobility of possibilities which makes essence be what it is, since the complexity of any essence, with its contradictions and diversities, is outlined and articulated only through these. The essence is outlined, articulated, and constituted by its own possibilities.

Furthermore, *dynamai* is for Aristotle the principle of movement, of change – the actualization of all possibilities of movement and change, that is to say, *energeia*, force. The *dynamis* and the *energeia* do not refer merely to movement; endurance is also an ability for something, a *dynamis*. What is more, this passivity in an Aristotelian sense is not a lower degree of possibility, but is itself a possibility in full sense: the ability, possibility, and force of reception, acceptance, endurance. This is worth to be kept in mind when outlining illness as possibility.

The abilities and possibilities inherent in the *ousia* are undetermined, since that what is undetermined exists as possibility (*dynamis*), and not as something actual, real (*energeia*). An example taken from the volume illustrates that the rose by its essence (with regard to its species) can be yellow or red (this is what its indeterminacy means), but one particular rose is yellow in actuality, by its *energeia*. This example also illustrates how possibility pertains to the essence and how it refers to the essence. The mere fact that possibility is undetermined, does not make it meaningless or inarticulate. Although a rose by its essence and possibility can be yellow or red, it cannot be just anything else, for example it cannot be feathered, two-legged, or it cannot be milked. Moreover, in the author’s view it is precisely possibility as a force by which being is constituted and articulated, since “it is the *dynamis*, the possibility by which the *force of indeterminacy*, its contradictory liveliness, its highly enriching nature and tension, and also openness, making the

beings and being ever more diverse or sketchy, colorful or on the contrary, paler, breaks in and is established as a constitutive factor”. (p. 152).

As apparent from those said above, possibility pertains and refers first of all to the general, to the species and genus. However, it concerns the primary *ousia*, the undetermined self-identical individual – to which, again, a whole plethora of possibilities pertains, essentially. Moreover, the actuality, the realization (which is the self-identical individual itself) always sends back and refers back to possibilities, since not any kind of possibility can become any kind of actuality. The possibility outlines, that is, pinpoints the limits and content of actuality. The indeterminacy inherent in possibility by no means implies emptiness; in fact, it can be termed as horizon delimitation, while its realization closes down this horizon. The popular idea that possibility has no reality is thus alien to Aristotle (and this volume as well). Since inasmuch as actuality (that everybody considers real) is the “realization” of non-real possibilities, it comes almost as a miracle that it exists at all – writes István Király V. Moreover, it is also articulate, that is to say, it can be characterized by all the other categories, and it is able to change, therefore it also has its own possibilities. The true-real possibility of being pertaining to the essence is never “merely”, “only”, and “accidentally” a possibility, but it is constitutive of actuality. This actuality constituted by possibility creates a live connection between the *ousia* and the possibilities of all the other categories. Because quality, quantity, place, etc. also have their particular possibilities – it is not only the essence, but also the quality, the quantity, the relations of beings that can change according to their possibilities. The quality of living beings can degrade, their weight can diminish, they can age and change their place – insofar as they possess these possibilities within themselves. In other words – and following an example linked to this subject – the only ill person who can be cured is the one who still possesses the possibility of becoming healthy within oneself.

Every actuality and essence can be best understood from its possibilities. So, despite the fact that Aristotle emphasizes the better and nobler character of actuality, István Király V. states precisely in the spirit of the Aristotelian idea that actuality is none other than the bringing into action, into operation of the forces of possibility, therefore actuality cannot be understood without, and cannot be separated from, possibility.

Essentially (that is, with reference to the essence) possibility simultaneously comprises conflicting things and states. For instance, that what can be healthy can also be ill – the two possibilities simultaneously and indeterminately pertain to the essence of living beings. And what ceases in actuality, is not this or that (not actualized) possibility, only the simultaneity of their antagonism. The person ill in actuality is not healthy, but – with particular regard to its essence – he has not lost the possibility of health. “On the contrary – writes the author – health and its preservation or restoration emerges as a problematic possibility, that is, as a *dynamis* for man – and for the *physis*, life, the *zoe* and the *bios* – precisely because there are illnesses and there are actually sick and suffering people.” (p. 161)

Further following the author’s train of thought, illness is a possibility which threatens our life, its course, quality, duration, and content by deficiencies. Therefore, it is a dangerous possibility, constant and universal. Illness both as a

possibility and as an actuality sends us to the essence of our life, since it concerns us in our being, and it requires an “acknowledging-observing-searching” attitude. That is to say, it leads us to *entelecheia*. *Entelecheia* means the essential purpose of things, processes, and actions, the way in which, in the movement of possibilities and forces, the living being reaches its purpose, its accomplishment. At the same time, it is nothing else than unique and exceptional *energeia*, a force in which beings arrive to their own and particular being and appearance: they become what and as they really are. In unfolding the meaning of *entelecheia*, István Király V. cites Heidegger’s interpretation, that by the *entelecheia*, the being possesses itself within its limits in the *eidos* (the appearance), and this is how its possibilities become visible in their exposedness to being. Therefore the purpose of philosophy and man is precisely to search and discover possibility and its ever newer horizons together with, and within, “the givenness”.

That is – referring now to illnesses – one must reveal and understand the possibility of their threatening, precisely to be able to gain knowledge, experience, techniques, and methods for their possible healing. For this reason, it must only be acknowledged, recognized, and assumed again that illness is a possibility pertaining to the essence of life: “With respect, therefore, to being, the living beings, and their being, “illness” and “health” are not merely some mutually exclusive “states of being-alive”, but much rather possible *modes of being-alive*.” (p. 166)

But how is illness a possibility? Surely, as *steresis*, in other words, privation. Still, although it is customary to define illness as the lack of health, that does not mean at all that illness and illnesses have no essence of their own – they have a very concrete and well definable essence, not merely “the lack of health”. Illness as *steresis* is a relation is itself which concerns, articulates, modifies, and organizes the essence – while any modification of the essence is essential. Healthy and sick *ousia* is the same – possibilities of one and the same living being, but their realization changes the *ousia*. That is to say, an ill person is not another person, but a different person nevertheless than while being healthy. He is different with regard to his being and possibilities, therefore essentially.

Illness is therefore a possibility which is a danger and a threat, and of which we are not merely afraid, but which we experience in this fear. Naturally, illness limits and restricts the abilities and possibilities of being of the ill person, while it also reorganizes his world and relationship to the world. At the same time, the fear from illnesses has a structure of challenge and ordeal: it urges for questioning, it mobilizes, it raises awareness, and prompts for precaution – in other words, it activates. What is more, it turns man towards himself, that is, it is essentially reflexive, and exactly by this reflexivity does it become a life-articulating, life-forming possibility. The world of the ill person is constituted and outlined in a particular way.

In addition, when fearing illness, we do not only fear suffering or the limitation of our possibilities, but in effect death: the possibility of death outlined and determined by illnesses. The experience, or “merely” the fear of illnesses outlines life and man as being essentially mortal. It is not incidental therefore that this volume’s line of thought is organically connected on several points to one of István Király V.’s previous volumes, *Halandóan lakozik szabadságában az ember*

(Mortally dwells man in his freedom, Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2007). And others as well, as long as the second chapter problematizes the intricate relations of illness and freedom, and in this context several references and recurrences occur to the above mentioned book on the one hand, and to another of the same author's volumes on the other hand, entitled *Kérdés-pontok a történelemhez, a halálhoz és a szabadsághoz* (Question-points to history, death, and freedom, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008). As the author writes in the preface of this (and his other) volumes: "Any author concerned with matters of thinking actually writes one and one single "text"! Which time will every now and then join together – under different titles - into smaller or larger volumes." (p. 9) This is not to say, of course, that the ideas of this volume would not be comprehensible or elaborate enough without the other books.

Proceeding to the second chapter of the book, it might seem astounding that as soon as illness was revealed as a possibility which is privation and deficiency, restricting us in our abilities and possibilities of being, István Király V. searches here for the connections of illness and freedom. It has been clear from the beginning that freedom in connection with illness does not mean that man can completely free himself of illnesses – as long as it has already been settled that the possibility of illness pertains to the essence of man. What does then freedom mean with reference to illness? What is its content and what are its limitations? In István Király V.'s words: "illness is equally a deficiency and a *challenge* of human freedom." (p. 186) Let us see, what this means. It evidently means that the connection of freedom and illness is twofold. Factually, the actuality of an illness limits human freedom. The deficiencies and inconveniences connected to illness unavoidably lead to the restriction of human freedom, therefore illness in this sense is the actual damage and narrowing of human freedom. However, taken as a possibility, illness challenges, organizes and structures, mobilizes and at the same time manifests human freedom. Since the possibility of illness urges man and mankind for questioning, searching, (self-)reflection, and action. What else lies at the basis of medicine's permanent practice of research and experiment than the fact and experience that the possibility of illness appears as a problem? A mobilizing problem urging for action which results in historical actions explicitly assumed by medical sciences – and this is nothing else than the action of human freedom. Summarizing, illness as actuality restricts freedom, while illness as possibility mobilizes and displays, manifests it.

At this point, the volume returns in a short excursus to the ideas on the essence of freedom put forth in the volume *Kérdés-pontok...*, revisiting and rethinking them in a concise way. It emphasizes that any authentic philosophical thematization ends in the matter of freedom, but not in order to contrast freedom as a pseudo-consolation either with the threatening possibility of illness or with death, but because freedom as man's essential mode of being is also essentially connected to man's other essential modes and possibilities of being, namely death, history, and illness. The essential connection between illness and freedom is that both have the structure of questioning-searching. Freedom is not a state, nor a situation, nor is it an attribute, but a *peculiarity of being* intertwining all human modes of being, actions, and experiences. With regard to its essence and course, freedom is nothing



else than search and questioning. On account of this questioning, freedom makes one questionable-problematic-open, and thus it urges for action. In order to understand the real import of this thought, it is also worth leafing through the author's earlier book, *Kérdő jelezés – több-csendbeni alkalmazott filozófiai zajhábortás a szabad(ság) kérdezés(é)ben* (Question marking – a (multi)silenced applied philosophical breach of noise in free(dom's) questioning), (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2004), as well as the already mentioned volume, *Kérdéspontok...*

As an essential possibility and through its reflexivity, it is precisely ourselves that illness makes questionable. It has already been clarified in the first chapter that illness can be considered the action and representation of human freedom precisely as questioning and searching. At the same time, the understanding resulting from illness also induces our ability to change and understand ourselves. It brings an ontological-existential alteration which István Király V. terms "emancipation", probably in order to express the "liberating" effect of the possibility of illness.

Furthermore, the question-structure and questionability of illness and freedom is a result of the recognition and assumption of human finiteness. The questionability "brought to being" and revealed by the experience of the possibility of death is the point where this book converges with the author's previous volumes: "Exactly because man dwells mortally, he dwells, and must dwell questioningly and historically – that is, bringing to life history in being, as a new dimension of being – in freedom." (p. 109) And just like man dies and relates to the possibility of death as a human being, similarly he falls ill and relates to illnesses as a human being – that is, affected in its entire being: inquisitively and being challenged, that is, being free.

Finally, as formulated in the concluding words of the book, illness is a challenging experience, "the challenge of the knowledge of being – and of the self". (p. 111) Who is ill, is not only ill in one or another of his organs, but directly in his being. Illness reorganizes one's entire being and mode of being – this is why István Király V. summarizes that the ill person's world is also ill (p. 114), since an ill person's world is indeed completely reorganized. Illness is not merely endurance, but as we have seen, also the challenge and mobilization of human freedom, which turns back man to himself and his world by trying to understand his (ill) self and (ill) world in questioning and searching. It is only thus and in this sense that we humans "learn" from illnesses – of course, the author primarily has in mind serious, that is, death-outlining illnesses which "condense" time, the time of life-history. What does it mean? Surely, it means that our values, relationships, interactions, purposes, attitudes become questionable, we revise and reinterpret, or directly reassess them. While in time of illness it is not only "health", "life" or "death" that become visible in their true weight but also the weight of human freedom.

In conclusion, István Király V.'s book is not an easy read. On the other hand, a philosophical meditation on illness should not be allowed to be easy. It needs to be mentioned, as a rare, yet highly useful circumstance, that the volume offers a detailed (almost 70 pages long) summary for the non-Hungarian audience.

The English text is the brilliant translation of Emese G. Czintos, and it overviews the ideas of the book in the same structural order.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos