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Introductory Chapter: The Transition from Distress to Acceptance of Human Frailty - Anthropology and Psychology of the Pandemic Era

Fabio Gabrielli and Floriana Irtelli

1. Introduction

The irruption of covid-19 on the world scene has brought about a profound change of our way of being in the world, disrupting economic, political and social structures, and exposing our lives to a precariousness that the risk of falling ill renews every day. This has created an era of uncertainty and anxiety. Anxiety, unlike fear, is generated by a state of indeterminacy and general uncertainty. Being exposed to a virus that spreads beyond all geographical and social boundaries emphasizes that it is able to escape the control of science and medicine, thus causing a general climate of sadness characterized by pervasive forms of anxiety, prolonged states of insomnia, gloomy resignation or, conversely, social dynamics characterized by aggression ready to pour into homes and squares. This state of affairs risks further fuelling blind rage, authoritarian populism, resentment, envy and revenge, sad passions that should instead be reconverted into projects of hope [1]; we can also note that expressions such as pandemic fatigue [2–6] and limbo anxiety have now entered the new psychiatric vocabulary to indicate the sense of widespread fatigue that characterizes our lives. We have therefore entered this new era from a less than optimal state: frenetic, self-centered, subjected to continuous pushes for productivity, we were probably already experiencing a certain sickness of living. The Korean philosopher B. In this regard, the Korean philosopher B. Chul Han argues that we come from an era characterized by a sort of logic of uniformity: in summary, this author suggests that anxiety, mood disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline disorder and burnout arise in a society that has no other alternatives to efficiency and productivity; it is therefore characterized by a standardized thinking, inflexible and uncreative in which narcissism reigns and covers extreme fragility, ready to explode at the first crisis [7]. If we do not want to react to the current situation with gloomy resignation, we must accept fragility as an existential condition of the human being, whose life is always exposed to risk, and develop responsibility and the ability to take care of one's own life project.

2. Fear and distress as fundamental emotional situations

M. Heidegger in the “Existential Analytic” of Being and Time written in 1927, as it is known, has focused his theory in the description of being (Dasein) not

in a transcendental sense (as for Husserl) but from the point of view of the vital and concrete flows of human existence, that is man in his real existential dimension, which according to this author is characterized by fear and anxiety. In fact, Heidegger believes that fear and anguish are fundamental emotional states for the understanding of human existence. Already during the summer semester of 1924 dedicated to the Fundamental Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy, Heidegger confronts in particular the Rhetoric of Aristotle and underlines the intimate connection between thought and passion. Heidegger speaks of emotional situation (Befindlichkeit) as the “feeling situated in a certain state of mind” and this concept will find its theoretical maturity in the work *Being and Time* in which it is emphasized that there can be no understanding of man and his multiple ways of being, his relationship with others and with the world, without understanding the affective dimension. Fear, not by chance, in *Being and Time*, was defined as a “mode of emotional situation”, and anguish, in two texts of 1929-1930, *What is Metaphysics* and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, is configured as a key element: a privileged existential state from which to question man and the world. If fear and anguish are configured as pivotal emotional moments for man, they nevertheless present a different phenomenology. Just in “*Being and Time*”, Heidegger presents us with a description of “fear” (Furcht) and “anguish” (Angst) [8]. Fear according to this author has a determined nature and a specific cause, as it contemplates the “before what of fear” [das Wovor], and also the “why (das Worum) of fear”. Fear is therefore always concerned with a specific entity encountered in the world that nonetheless possesses a characteristic of menace (Bedrohlichkeit). Anguish, on the other hand, is not determined by this or that specific entity, rather its cause is completely indeterminate. This indefiniteness not only leaves it effectively completely undecided from which entity the threat comes, but also means that in general the entity is “irrelevant”. Anguish, according to this author, originates from the fundamental relationship between being in the world (dasein) and the world itself, from the fact that we exist in a world that sometimes seems meaningless and in which we are destined to death. And yet, it is precisely from anguish that the human being experiences the possibility of the free development of its potential, therefore, anguish makes us discover both our fragility, our destiny of death, but at the same time, it gives us the possibility to deploy our potential, stimulating our creativity and our projects, while being aware of our human fragility. We could define this anguish as vertical anguish. The first wave of the pandemic therefore caused dismay and provoked vertical anguish while in the so-called second wave, the population was apparently more prepared, but found itself in an even more painful overall state of mind [9] we therefore became more aware of the fact that Nature is indomitable and, according to Kierkegaard’s theory, a horizontal anguish was added to our vertical anguish, which is based on the realization that the power of nature in which we are immersed is greater than our own [10].

3. Life paths

The Greeks distinguished a biological life, common to every species, which is represented by the alternation of life and death, called *zoè*, and a life understood as a specific existence, i.e. a segment called *bios*, which coincides with our unrepeatable life and biography, with its precise beginning and end. Each biography tries to carve out within the common biological life a duration, hoping that it is not only prolonged as much as possible in time, but, above all, that it is also full, bright, satisfying. In other words, man seeks to carry out in the world his own power, or as Spinoza says man is characterized by effort, tension, internal drive to exist, but man

is also part of Nature and therefore can not be conceived of as separate from the rest of nature, in fact, the term *bios* emphasizes precisely our fragility, our mortal destiny for which we passively suffer our natural fate: we can not escape death. In the time of the pandemic, our passivity, that is, our dependence on other powers, and in particular on the power of untameable Nature, made itself felt in all its extent. From the sense of our passivity, from the vertical and horizontal anguish we are experiencing, a new way of living human frailty can emerge, however, and we can develop new ways of taking care of our lives. The word “care” is a word of Latin origin, whose etymological root is *ku* = *kau-kav* and refers to the concept of observing, watching, it therefore indicates an attentive, thoughtful, vigilant observation, a kind of restless concern. Care is an essential way of approaching life, the form we give to the time of existence, guarding it, according to our vocation and our character. At the same time, each of us also wants to be the object of care and wants to be welcomed in our fragility [11], in the anguish that accompanies every attempt to have control over our existence, which is never fully achievable [12], as the current pandemic is also demonstrating.

4. The wound of uncertainty

The Western world, at least the European one, is heir to three great historical-cultural traces: the Greek civilization, the Christian one, the scientific revolution. We are indebted to the Greeks, in the terms we use, in our logical categories, in our worldviews. For the Greeks, explaining reality means leading the multiple back to unity, in the sign of *kósmos*, of order; according to this perspective, order governs the world, and makes it fraternal to humans, who in turn become familiar with the world thanks to their ability to measure it; according to Plato, we can explain the world because it always refers back to unity, to measure; this theoretical and philosophical point of view has been challenged today by the perspectives of the science of complexity, but this does not undermine the profoundly human aspiration to measure and control with which the subject takes distance from the anonymous and undifferentiated character of the world through concentration on himself and on the satisfaction of his own needs [13]. We must consider at this point that in the era of the pandemic there is a profound uncertainty, which is no longer limited only to economic or social precariousness, it is in fact biological precariousness: a virus is roaming the world, which at least for the first time shakes our existence from its foundations; in fact, the virus’ aggressiveness constitutes a brutal and tangible attack on our very possibility of giving a beginning to things and on our tendency to control reality and satisfy our needs: anguish germinates precisely from this loss of control, from a state of both existential and biological uncertainty.

5. Perspectives on uncertainty

In a world marked by pandemics, which we find increasingly difficult to control, uncertainty makes the present time threatening and unproductive, lacking in planning tension. Uncertainty produces fear, then anguish, then sadness, and Spinoza reveals something very simple: sadness never makes one intelligent, which is why the powerful need the sadness of the subjugated [14]. It is evident that the introduction of a perpetual state of sadness, sometimes artfully amplifying the margins of uncertainty, risks creating a distressed, resigned, and therefore controllable human community. However, there are two types of sadness: one refers to impotence, to inaction, to resignation; the other is born from the awareness that the things of the

world are destined to perish, that nothing is forever, that our structural finiteness can never authorize us to realize all our possibilities, our projects, our dreams, yet this does not mean that we should stop, that we should resign ourselves. We can call this second type of sadness the one that can lead to fragile creativity: the capacity to create even in the awareness of one's own fragility, of one's own human limits; in order for there to be fragile creativity, it is necessary to turn uncertainty into an opportunity for creative vitality, an opportunity to enhance our qualities also for the benefit of the community [15] the capacity to field a plastic, open and dynamic human planning; plasticity in particular is configured as the radical possibility of the human being to modify himself and the world: a vital and creative possibility that should induce hope, not gloomy resignation [16].

6. Conclusion

The body communicates to us with immediacy our state of health and illness, and through the body we experience emotions and feelings [17]. When care comes into the picture as a remedy for illness and suffering, it is always oriented towards our fragility [18]. When care of the body comes into the picture it calls for the concept of gentleness [19] and respect for others, which is also expressed in respecting the rules of physical distancing in a suitable way [20]. In the pandemic time we have therefore experienced physical distance as a painful brake on relational contact, yet it is a necessary distance [21]. The recovery of distance is therefore an absolute urgency [22–24]. Many have been the consequences of this era marked by illness, for example, today we have also become accustomed to stopping, and this has distanced us from efficiencyism and from the logic of productivity [25], the pandemic has shown, forcing us into our homes, how it is necessary to find patience, perseverance and temperance to take care of one's life project [26]. The pandemic has also raised several criticisms on bio-politics and bio-power by fomenting the debate between deniers and non-deniers [27–30]; as a population we are called by the virus to act politically in the cities [31] and we must recognize that not all bio-politics is characterized by the logic of domination, of the exercise of sovereignty, there is also a bio-politics that calls us to a collective and responsible action in the face of particular ecological events, such as covid-19. This collective, bio-political action, precisely because the virus has shown all our precariousness with respect to the immense power of nature, has as its ultimate goal the recovery of distance as an act of respect for our neighbors and society more generally, so it is possible that this era constitutes an opportunity to develop a great responsibility towards others [32, 33].

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