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MAGAZINE

We are fragile but not defenceless: changing is possible

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Considerations on morality and human fragility in the time of the coronavirus, by the philosopher of FBK-ISR Paolo Costa. The good news is that we can do our part and change.

Many people think that the health emergency we are facing in these days is the most insidious challenge that could have happened to a complex society like ours. Where does this common feeling come from?

Generally speaking, the explanations that are read in newspapers revolve around a key concept, that of “fragility”. The bottom line is that the big lesson the coronavirus epidemic would be teaching us is that we are more fragile creatures than we thought.

As a philosopher, I might perhaps agree with this argument if the people who support it actually meant something like that. **The moral lives of us human beings are fragile because situations can arise that confront us with choices over whose consequences we have very little control.** In fact, for a few weeks now we have been continually forced to make decisions whose effects we not only cannot measure, but we are not even sure of their moral quality. Our days are overwhelmed by statistical dynamics, whereas most of the time it would rather help us understand what damage we could inflict on the flesh-and-blood people with whom we continuously deal: isn’t it that our keeping them at a distance will offend them? And is the maxim of always privileging public health compatible with our special duties towards the people we love? And what about all the rest that goes beyond the value of health – for example personal freedom or democracy – when our moral coherence could cause damage not to our lives, but to the lives of others?

These are difficult questions indeed, but what people generally mean when they say that we have discovered ourselves fragile, is that in the past few weeks we have realized that we are mortal. But, let me be frank, did we need a pandemic to find out to be finite and vulnerable creatures? Except for some teenagers in full delusion of omnipotence, it seems to me a risky hypothesis. Personally I am convinced that even the boundless trust that modern people place in technology is more the symptom of an acute sense of their biological fragility than vice versa. Those who point out to us that in such difficult circumstances our mortality showed up as an extreme contingency are likely to come closer to the truth. In other words, we feel abandoned to a sort of gigantic global lottery

where the evolution of events is almost entirely entrusted to fate – both in the sense of the evolution of the epidemic (why in Italy and not in Austria? Why in Korea and not in Vietnam?) and in the sense of the development of an every day more and more likely infection (why only two lines of fever for me and pneumonia for someone else?). This confuses us, even if the truth hard to digest, on a closer inspection, is that for people less privileged than us this has always been the norm, not the exception to the rule.

All in all, however, the true fragility that the coronavirus emergency has brought us is definitely not our individual mortality. It is rather the surprising vulnerability of a civilization that has chosen as modus vivendi what the sociologist Hartmut Rosa has appropriately described as a form of life based on **dynamic stabilization: we live in societies, that is to say, that in order to stay in balance must continually rush.** They can neither slow down nor stop. They must frantically innovate, compete, increase productivity, efficiency, mobility, etc., while they do not seem to care about the vulnerability of social bonds. I do not deny that such a society has many virtues and several exciting sides, I limit myself only to finding that it has very little to do with the precariousness which by definition characterizes natural balances.
Those who still have doubts about it can stop for a moment to reflect on the virtues that would be indispensable today (humility, patience, solidarity, seriousness, spirit of sacrifice, immobility) and the qualities that are instead more appreciated (and rewarded) in our world (assertiveness, speed, competition, irony, egocentrism, mobility). If we add to this the almost automatic adherence to the idea that one's happiness constitutes the overwhelming good in all circumstances, it becomes easy to understand why a more subtle than powerful virus has knocked down a sophisticated society like ours.

However, there is nothing inevitable about this diagnosis. People can actually change: they are not condemned to remain what they are because of some supposed scientific law. This is why science can only help fifty percent to overcome this crisis. The other half depends on our ability to treasure that wisdom (secular or religious, it doesn't matter) that has taught us for millennia that **human beings have within them, and thanks to their ability to weave relationships, sufficient resources to rise up to the best parts of themselves.** Not only are the inimitable examples of saints and heroes to be considered: any of us have demonstrated this capability in those not at all exceptional moments when we discovered that the center of our existence does not coincide in the least with our miserable ego. It can be done. We can quickly change and elevate ourselves to our best parts. It is not a scientifically demonstrable truth, but it is a truth no less granitic altogether. Simply, rather than demonstrated, it must be witnessed. One more reason to roll up your sleeves.

The time will come to sum up and understand together what lessons we can draw from this unexpected full-contact with our fragility. Nothing will be as before after this health emergency. And even if not everything will be as we would like it to be, we will all know from experience that we can do much better than we mistakenly believed we were able to do *après le déluge* ("after the storm", ed.).

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AUTHORS

- Paolo Costa