



Original article

The role of philosophy in the pandemic era

El papel de la filosofía en la época de la pandemia

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Abstract

Philosophy does not offer tools for solving practical problems, but looks for a sense of concrete situations through a rational reflection. In the present case this sense focuses on: 1. human fragility (the virus can kill any human being); 2. human impotence (our situation is essentially identical with that of ancient epidemics: our defence reduces us to isolation); 3. limited efficiency of techno-science (the decisive therapy for this illness has not been found yet, despite the efforts of hundreds of laboratories and pharmaceutical companies); 4. rediscovery of common good and human solidarity (the protection of the individuals is needed for the protection of society and vice versa); 5. the incumbent presence of death (in the light of which the hierarchy of values orienting human existence can be reshaped).

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The results of these reflections can point out responsibilities of the political power, and lead to hostility against philosophers and the effort of silencing their voice, reminding us of the example of Socrates

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Resumen

La filosofía no nos ofrece herramientas para la resolución de problemas prácticos, pero busca dar un sentido a las situaciones concretas a través de una reflexión racional. En el caso que nos ocupa este sentido se centra en: 1. la fragilidad humana (el virus puede matar a cualquier ser humano); 2. impotencia humana (nuestra situación es esencialmente idéntica a la de las antiguas epidemias: nuestra defensa se reduce al aislamiento); 3. eficiencia limitada de la tecnociencia (aún no se ha encontrado la terapia decisiva para esta enfermedad, a pesar de los esfuerzos de cientos de laboratorios y empresas farmacéuticas); 4. redescubrimiento del bien común y la solidaridad humana (la protección de los individuos es necesaria para la protección de la sociedad y viceversa); 5. La presencia predominante de la muerte (en cuya luz se puede remodelar la jerarquía de valores que orientan la existencia humana).

Los resultados de estas reflexiones pueden evidenciar responsabilidades del poder político y producir hostilidad contra los filósofos y el esfuerzo de silenciar su voz, recordándonos entre otros el ejemplo de Sócrates

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Palabras clave: Filosofía; Pandemia; covid-19; Bioética; Virus

“There is nothing to fear in life, you just have to understand it. Now is the time to understand more, so we can fear less”

Marie Curie

An analogy

Thinking about the pandemic? The very question takes us fully into the field of philosophy. We can think of the pandemic because we are alive. “cogito ergo sum” I think, therefore I am (Descartes, 2003). Being alive, we suffer the pandemic that threatens our existence and the very possibility of thinking about it. Although, it

must be said, we do not all suffer the pandemic in the same way. Is it possible to find an analogy between the spread of the virus and the spread of philosophical ideas? It is certainly possible: philosophy, for example, is similar to the virus in that it pushes us to set priorities and make us aware of our finiteness, but also in that it forces us to pose new problems. It is impossible to live without ideas, not because we have or stop having ideas, but because the ideas are having us. This happens because reality itself imposes certain ideas on us, whether we like it or not. In fact, even a simple virus can mobilize more ideas than a philosophy treatise ([Benarde, 1973](#)).

There are deeper reasons for this analogy and the first is that both are invisible and are transmitted from one person to another. Philosophy is transmitted through ideas most of the time in an oral form, and also viruses, such as covid-19, are transmitted through very small drops of saliva that come out of the mouth, while their diffusion is so rapid that even in the case of ideas it is used to say that they have become viral. The virus, entering the body, acts as a dangerous agent that puts our health at risk. Philosophy does not enter the body but into the mind, yet certain philosophical ideas can also be considered a threat to man, as happened during some historical occasions: Socrates was put to death, because his ideas were considered as a threat to the power structures of the time ([Platon, 2003](#)). The same thing happened with Spinoza ([Waterfield, 2009](#)), whose ideas led to excommunication from his congregation and social community. Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy was also considered a danger, so much so that in Great Britain his play *The closed door* was prohibited, as well as in the Soviet Union his play *The dirty hands*, while Pope Pius XII put all his works in the Index of prohibited books ([Waterfield, 2002](#)); Gabriel Marcel said that Sartre's thought corrupted the young people ([Aloi, 2014](#)), repeating the accusation formulated against Socrates at his time. These three examples alone are enough to mention philosophers whose thinking represented a public threat to many, just like viruses. In this way the philosopher appears (as well as the virus) an *ēpidēmos* in the true Greek sense of the word, that is, someone who is in the *dēmos*, who circulates among people of a certain community and endangers their lives. This is why philosophy and viruses, if taken in isolation, when they spread in societies can provoke and determine profound changes in mentality, when they recall previously neglected needs and awareness and in this way they can profoundly influence the course of history, for better or for worse.

What is philosophy for?

Let us leave the analogy aside and ask ourselves what philosophers are doing during the current pandemic. The frustration of feeling useless is a considerable and it is difficult to hide it. We remain at home to write our own articles, to read, to give classes and webinars, but we would like to do more while the world sinks. There are spontaneous questions that arise in the face of the current situation and which seem reducible to a single fundamental one: What is philosophy for? Or: What have philosophers written in the past in the face of thousands of deaths caused by the event of an epidemic? Some ask themselves more concretely in what philosophers can contribute, what effective contribution they have made or can give to the solution of the problems that are oppressing us, as if they were a caste of specialists. This perspective, rather than magnifying the figure of philosophers, diminishes them. Perhaps the pandemic will serve to remind us that philosophy cannot be reduced to any professional category. In fact, no philosopher before has written directly on epidemics or pandemics (perhaps with the sole exception of Camus who wrote *The plague* (Camus, 1947), although some such as Fichte, Hegel, William of Ockham, the Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and very likely St. Augustine as well died during one of them.

But let's go back to the more direct and crucial question: What is philosophy for? Many people reply that Philosophy is the thing with which or without which everything remains as it is. Instead, I like the answer given by Cornelio Fabro (Giannatiempo, 1995), which was the following: Philosophy is not at service, but reigns. It was a somewhat aristocratic answer and almost a joke. However, it expresses something true: philosophy does not have the task of providing tools or instruments to be used in concrete life. This is the task of technology, but this does not mean that philosophy has no other task in front of even concrete situations. I will summarize this concept by saying that philosophy aims to give a sense to reality. From this it can then derive duties, concrete indications and guidelines for practice in the situations that lie ahead. How does philosophy this work? It does this through rational reflection. This is the methodology of philosophy in dealing with the different problems it deals with and that are not few. We will therefore try to identify which are, in the current situation, some themes on which philosophical reflection is focused.

Some important topics

A first point concerns the fragility of man. The pandemic puts us in the presence of the fact that we can all be affected and killed without distinction, regardless of age, sex, even social conditions. The pandemic does not look at anyone and has shown that fragility is a typical condition of the human being as such. This is important because, as modern man grew, he lost the sense of his fragility: he had the impression of gradually becoming the master of the world, of history and also, of life, through the progress of medicine, technology and ways in which he could organize his existence. On the other hand, we realize, and the pandemic has been very clear from this point of view, that this underlying fragility is not completely eliminated.

At this first point another one is connected: that of vulnerability. Vulnerability is partly synonymous with fragility, but with an extra accent, since who is vulnerable is the one who can be injured and this is important because it indicates that the human condition is also exposed, apart from its initial fragility, to be further affected. This is what is happening today: we are affected in our everyday way of living, we can no longer do what we used to do and this regardless of whether we have to go to hospital and maybe even lose our lives.

A third point is that of the impotence of the human being, which is different from what we have previously considered. Impotence means being in the condition of not being able to do anything substantial. Let's try to consider how we are behaving towards this pandemic and how people were behaving 200,300, 1000 years ago. Practically in the same way: the only defence that we are able to offer is isolation because, despite all our progress, this sudden appearance of a new, unknown virus is such that even the most advanced technologies we have available could not help us. After all, when they tell us to go out with masks, respecting the safety distances and avoiding the contagions corresponds to what people did at the time of the Manzonian plague, of the plague mentioned by Boccaccio ([Asor Rosa, 1992](#)), of that narrated by [Thucydides \(1996\)](#) and so on . . . This fact is very significant because the man was gradually taking the attitude of the one who, giving time to time, could do everything. There was no longer a sense of intrinsic limits. Instead, this experience is showing us that in the most fundamental situations, such as that of surviving a particularly violent disease, we are unable to react much more effectively than by hiding, or isolating or protecting ourselves as our ancient ancestors did.

All this leads us to reflect on the reasons that gave man the impression of being omnipotent. We do not want to underestimate the progress of science or technology: there is no doubt that today we know much more and much better than our grandparents, great grandparents and ancestors; not only that, but that we can do many things that our grandparents did not even imagine. But all this must not give us the impression that we have become the masters of life and nature, that we have become the builders of our existence. No, man is not the builder of his own existence, man is still a creature, that is, a being, privileged from many points of view, but who is always part of creation, even if he has qualities that allow him to progress in a certain sense indefinitely. This must be especially emphasized today, when there are ideologies that even imagine proposing a future created by man himself through technology. I speak of transhumanism and posthumanism which even come to speculate that man can go beyond himself, thanks to technologies that he somehow incorporates. But where does he incorporate them? He incorporates them into his body and in this way he thinks of changing his ontological constitution, as is said in philosophy, that is, his true human substance.

Is all this possible? What we are experiencing now is showing us that, despite the great progress that exists, today we are not yet in possession of a precise and specific drug and not even a vaccine against coronavirus, despite the fact that there are hundreds of laboratories in the world working in those research, behind which are very powerful pharmaceutical industries that pay for these research with the prospect of obtaining large profits. Man cannot predict with certainty, for example, that within two years we will have the expected drug, rather than within four months. We will therefore say that the volume of our knowledge certainly increases, however, as it happens when we increase the volume of a sphere by inflating it, the surfaces, that is the border with the infinite space of the unknown, also increases, both from the point of view of knowledge and from the point of view of being able to do.

We do not enter into complicated discussions concerning the consequences of technological development, that is, the unpredictable consequences of many things that we are doing today. It is sufficient to reflect on the current pandemic, that cannot be addressed within the limited perspectives of the specialized approaches of single scientific and technological disciplines. The problem is not to have certain certainties but to understand the global scope and the fundamental situations, and the substance of things.

Another aspect on which we are invited to reflect in the current situation is that of solidarity, understood as the overcoming of individual selfishness to take into

consideration the common good, because it has been realized that the individual alone cannot resolve his problems : one must be able to count on a community and therefore has responsibilities towards it. So the interest, the well-being of the individual ends up coinciding with the interest of society. On the other hand, we cannot think of promoting the progress of society without the participation of the individuals who make it up. We have seen this even in an elementary case, that of the obligation to go out with masks. The most common masks are not those that protect the wearer from contagion, but those that prevent one from bringing any pathogens to the outside. It may seem that the individual accepts the discomfort of the mask for the sake of society, but in reality it is clear that if everyone used the masks, he too would be protected from contagion. It is a very basic example that makes us understand how this coronavirus experience has made us discover a very important dimension and an essential value of our current life.

The last aspect of this pandemic that forced us to reflect was the presence of death always looming. Contemporary society has tried to marginalize death. Conversely, in these months death has been brought under our gaze continuously and this has also led us to recover the most precise sense of medicine. The aim of medicine was traditionally considered to cure and recover health, since it was obvious that death was an inevitable natural fact. Today, on the other hand, it seems that the main purpose of medicine is to defeat immediate death, to save the patient's life even at the cost of condemning the residual part to an extremely painful state from many points of view. The fact that in recent months we were put in the presence of so many deaths prompted us to reflect on the event of death itself, that is, to think that, once we arrive at that moment, we could ask ourselves what sense our life had, what are the things for which it was worth living and what instead those who have left no trace of themselves in our existence. This too is an aspect on which philosophy has long reflected, proposing hierarchies of values of different type. The present situation can help us reflect on how it is better to live well knowing that this life will have its end. In this sense, the role of philosophy would basically be to recognize one's biological limits, to teach to die (both literally and symbolically as a passage to a world different from what we have known so far). This is certainly a noble tradition of philosophy ranging from Plato, Cicero, Seneca, to Montaigne and Schopenhauer and beyond; however, it is based on the idea that in a difficult moment, as we have already pointed out, philosophy cannot do much because its task is not to find solutions to problems but simply to teach us how to accept them. Whoever taught men to die would teach them to live, Montaigne observed ([Montaigne De, 2012](#)).

The topics mentioned so far are not part of the usual university teaching programs. What is at stake is our way of life, the society we would like to have, the way we have to educate ourselves and others, and it does not seem that the faculty programs, with their evaluation methods, their indexed journals, their conferences and accreditation committees are very open to these problems

What help can we expect from philosophy?

Let's now return to our second initial question: what contribution can philosophers offer in the Covid-19 emergency? For philosophers who work in the field of ethics and bioethics this pandemic stimulates various reflections and probably opens up new fields of work. Let's start by simply acknowledging that there are no experts on Covid-19 at the moment: everything is being learned in the field. And very often the urgency puts doctors in front of difficult choices which they should not be obliged to make directly but relying on protocols established by a body of bioethics experts who should prepare new guidelines to make ethically responsible decisions and to know how to better spend limited available resources in order to improve the health of the population and rationalize the funds for medical care.

A final observation that I would like to underline (and with this I conclude) is that philosophy and the pandemic teach us that we are all passing through in this life, but also that the crisis (another Greek concept introduced in medicine by Hippocrates) leads to two possible outcomes: relapse or recovery. Hence there is not so much distance between learning to die and learning to live. The feeling of frustration and discouragement towards philosophy shouldn't win. The philosopher's task is not to find the meaning of life or to tell others how they should live but to provide conceptual tools useful to those who make difficult decisions, in communicating and explaining them to others. If we see philosophy in this way, then there is still much work for philosophers to do, not only in the current situation but also, and perhaps above all, in the future.

When Plato wondered how it was possible to ensure the best in the life of a state, he thought that this task should be entrusted to philosophers who, precisely because of their ability to encompass the good of each and every one, are able to establish needs and dictate public policies to meet them. This project seemed plausible because, at the time of Plato, the philosopher was in fact a scholar with knowledge also in the field, for example, of the natural sciences and mathematics, as well as exercised on reflection on the great themes of the meaning of life and moral responsibilities. Even

today the public authorities, the political leaders to face the pandemic are assisted by committees of experts, but these are simply scientists and technologists, each capable of giving assessments from the narrow point of view of his competence but no one is able to offer the indications of wisdom and basic orientation that would be necessary and we are faced with the uncertainties and contradictions that we all know. Even today philosophy would still have its voice to express in the face of the difficult choices that must be addressed.

Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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