

With or Without Covid: a tale on human vulnerability

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ABSTRACT – With or Without Covid: a tale on human vulnerability¹. The Covid-19 crisis leaves us with a lesson in the form of reminiscence. We don't learn anything new from it, but it reminds us of something we knew and had forgotten. It shows us our vulnerability in a new light, the inability to perfectly protect ourselves through prediction and control. Science does not predict with absolute certainty, and technologies do not keep everything under control, even if the former and the latter play many other praiseworthy roles. Ideologies can't see the future, try as they might. And yet, we are not without reliable guidance in deciding our actions. This guidance must be sought in what we are, not in the future. It is the fidelity to our common human nature that must advise us. It is the full realization of our personal being, of our peculiar vocation that guides us. So, the means for self-realization lie in the development of a virtuous character. This is the very same character that has mitigated the havoc the pandemic has wreaked, as to some extent, it was already present in many of our fellow citizens; the very same that would have alleviated even more suffering if only it had been present in more people and to a greater extent.

Keywords: Covid-19. Vulnerability. Prediction. Virtues. Prudence.

RESUMEN – Con Covid y Sin Covid: la vulnerabilidad humana. La crisis del Covid-19 deja una enseñanza en forma de reminiscencia. No aprendemos de ella nada nuevo, pero nos recuerda algo que supimos y olvidamos. Nos muestra con nueva luz nuestra vulnerabilidad, la imposibilidad de protegernos perfectamente mediante la predicción y el control. Las ciencias no predicen con certeza y las tecnologías no alcanzan a tenerlo todo bajo control, aunque las primeras y las segundas tengan otras muchas y beneméritas funciones. Las ideologías, no ven el futuro, por más que simulen hacerlo. Y, sin embargo, no carecemos que guía fiable para decidir nuestras acciones. Esta orientación hay que buscarla en el ser, no en el porvenir. Es la fidelidad a nuestra común naturaleza humana la que ha de aconsejarnos, es la realización plena de nuestro ser personal, de nuestra peculiar vocación la que nos guía. Y el medio para la autorrealización consiste en el desarrollo de un carácter virtuoso. El mismo carácter que ha mitigado los estragos de la pandemia, pues en cierto grado estaba ya presente en muchos de nuestros conciudadanos, el mismo que hubiera paliado aun más el sufrimiento de haber estado disponible en más personas y en mayor grado.

Palabras-clave: Covid-19. Vulnerabilidad. Predicción. Virtudes. Prudencia.

Introduction

Everything that has happened in recent months as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic may be regarded as a kind of *experience of the impossible*. No one imagined a year ago what the world would be going through today. No one thought, for example, that a developed country like Spain would end the ominous spring of 2020 with an excess mortality of one thousand per million inhabitants. We are faced with the experience of what we had previously considered impossible. Or, to be more precise, what we had previously never even imagined as a possibility. The fact that something that we had never imagined possible has happened should already give us a first and peremptory lesson. We may put it in Karl Popper's words: the future is open². The future is not in sight. What's more, the future doesn't in fact exist yet. We must act for it to appear, but it always appears before us in the present. Nature itself, on the one hand, and human free will, on the other, are constantly shaping it.

What is disconcerting is that when something that no one ever foresaw or imagined happens, it turns out that many, instead of taking it as a lesson, set out to make predictions for the post-pandemic, and no one's afraid to speak in terms of the future³. Among our contemporary thinkers, Giorgio Agamben predicts terrible police states of complete surveillance, while Byung-Chul Han celebrates – from Germany – that Eastern authoritarianism will end privacy. Moreover, according to Slavoj Žižek, a new communism is about to rise, as the virus has put the miseries of capitalism in plain sight. This is an astonishing idea, because it refers to a problem generated – we do not yet know how – in China, the largest area on the planet still ruled by a communist party. And then there's Yuval Harari, who has also set out to predict what the post-pandemic world will look like, even though he never predicted the pandemic itself in the first place. But the truth is that philosophy is not meant to practice futurology. It does not seek to predict what will be, but rather study what is and what should be.

It gives the impression that some have not yet gleaned the main lesson that the pandemic has reminded us. And I say *has reminded us*, because this lesson could have been learned much earlier, with or without Covid: all we know about the future is that we don't know what it will be like. We could have learned it from ancient wisdom: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans" says a Yiddish proverb. Our poets would also concur. For example, Spanish poet Jorge Guillén wrote: "What is extraordinary: everything." Or the most sensible philosophers, like Hans Jonas: "We know – and perhaps that is all we know – that most things will be different [...], that we must always count on something new happening, but that we do not know how to calculate it"⁴. However, after the shock that no one had ever anticipated, many have already taken up their crystal balls and peered into them to prophesy the future. Who says that tomorrow there won't be another jolt of a different sort or a repeat of the same tremor or an effective vaccine (or may be not) or something we can't even imagine today? Some are still ensnared by the

same illusion that modernity has set before us, that is, they still think that we must scrutinize the future and draw from it the relevant indications to guide our actions. A vanguard of self-styled visionaries wants to precede us on the path of supposed progress. They see the future, and their vision puts us on the right track, so they say.

But looking to the future is a fruitless occupation. You don't really see anything. If we wish to learn, we need to look to the past and rummage through the present. We need to look into what has happened to us and who we are, these curious beings to whom something unexpected is happening. That's what we have in sight and nothing else.

What Is Happening to Us?

Modernity has taught us to plan our lives by looking to the future, because science was supposed to predict it and technology to control it. Today, we know it's not that simple. It was an illusion created by historical chance. It turns out that the first mathematical science, the first to make acceptable predictions, endowed with a degree of precision, was planetary astronomy. And it turns out that this science studies an approximately isolated system. Thanks to it, we were able to create sustainable, if never perfect, calendars. Thus, the Laplacian illusion of predictability was seared into modern consciousness. It was thought that the solar system could be perfectly imitated by a clock, by a machine. In other words, that the solar system was actually a regular and perfectly predictable mechanism, rather than a corner of the universe and part of its history. From there, it was thought that the entire physical world, that nature as a whole, possessed these same characteristics. In particular, living beings and – why not – the human being himself would end up being seen under this mechanistic light. The latest extrapolation of this phantasmagoria led us thinking that human societies and their history were predictable. Thus, several modern ideologies turned to futurology. In self-attributing visionary capacity, they also acquired a certain authority, even a repressive and coercive power: what will be must be.

Psychologically, the image is as elemental as it is powerful. No one wants to stand still or go back when they have set out to get a goal. The vision of the future is therefore imposed on us as a mission. We must move towards that future that we see, which some, with special clarity and security, seem to have in sight. That is, everything that tends towards that future will be seen as good, and everything that paralyzes us or pushes us back will be seen as bad. Whoever controls the image of the future will also control what is deemed to be good and bad. Whoever is able to assert with greater conviction where we are headed will also be the one to tell us where we should go.

But this modern idea of predictability is now obsolete. There's no sensible person that holds this belief. It has been left only for the use and enjoyment of ideologies. Today we know that not even a clock works *like clockwork*. Planetary astronomy studies the solar system, that is, a

system which, in human scale, is almost isolated. However, the other systems we are interested in, from ecosystems to organisms, to social systems, are not isolated. They maintain intricate relationships with the environment and have great internal complexity. This makes them unpredictable. The most science can do is provide abstract models and scenarios that yield inaccurate, fallible, and uncertain conditional forecasts. Not to mention the element of unpredictability that human free will brings to the world. The *logos* will never encompass the *physis*. There will always be more things in heaven and earth than our philosophies can dream of, as ancient philosophers already knew, and as modern philosophers have forgotten, as the current and unexpected pandemic reminds us today. Of course, if we consider magnitudes that are far from the human scale, that are very large in terms of space and time, we realize that not even the solar system is perfectly predictable, because it is subjected to different interactions, not all of them integrated into our models.

Scientific models and theories may be seen as systems of expectations. Even artifacts endowed with so-called artificial intelligence (AI) are systems of expectations. Or rather, they are a prosthesis of our systems of expectations. An AI system places a point in an n-dimensional space constructed from a data set, and, based on this, tells us what to expect from the object represented by that point. Like any system of expectations, it may collapse when it registers the occurrence of something it previously considered impossible, that is, that it did not even consider. It's what we've called the experience of the impossible. When this happens, the system of expectations we used no longer has the ability to adapt; it cannot learn from this experience. When we are startled by the experience of the impossible, when our system of expectations collapses, we can only survive by creating another. And this step does not have to be purely arbitrary, random, or irrational, but, in some respects, it is guided by a practical and social knowledge that Aristotle called *phronesis*. This knowledge facilitates the inclusive constitution of experience, the management of emotions linked to the frustration of expectations, the propaedeutics of the creative moment, and the critical filtering of emerging systems of expectations.

Many of our interactions with reality fit into previous schemes, but others force us to break such schemes and create new ones. In the latter case, the leap to a new scheme or paradigm or system of expectations, towards a new theory or model, will be driven by a creative element and guided by some form of prudent rationality, if we do not want to trust everything at random. Precisely, the emergence of the recent pandemic on our horizon has triggered a restructuring process of the above-mentioned type. And you can always count on the fact that once again something will happen that we were previously not counting on.

We already knew all this, but we chose to forget it, because it is uncomfortable to think that we do not have everything under control, that the unexpected can happen, that our most important plans can make God laugh. Now, after the first Covid-19 wave, no one can ever ignore

this pearl of wisdom we gleaned from our ignorance. But if the future is no longer our guide, the compass of our actions, then how can we find our true north in our lives? Not by, of course, trying to look to the future, but by looking at our essence, our nature, at who we are. Our actions are projected into the future, but in sight, we only have what we are; from here we must extract wisdom. As for what will be, all we have to take for granted is our ignorance. Let what we are now and not the future be our guide. From what is, we learn what should be. And, as Hans Jonas⁵ teaches us, there doesn't have to be any fallacy in it.

In short: we are experiencing today what we previously considered impossible or had never even imagined. We already know that these kinds of experiences can occur and that our preparation for them cannot come from prediction, because by definition they are not predictable (they are *impossible*, or unimaginable). Our only source of guidance comes being faithful to our own nature, knowing what we are (human nature), who we are (as a person), and what our vocation (or function, in Aristotle's terms) is. The future of human beings should be built with an eye on human nature, not on the mirage of a supposed prediction. We are not guided by a utopia, but by remaining faithful to our essence. In the words of Pindar: "Become such as you are" (*Pythians*, II, 72), regardless of whether some coronavirus is circulating or not in the area.

What Are We? Who Are We? Human Vulnerability

In the current debate on human nature, we may differentiate between two starting points: the nihilistic position of those who deny that human nature exists and the radical naturalistic position of those who believe that everything is nature, and only nature, in the human being. Somewhere in the middle, we have another proposal – a more sensible one in my view – of developing an Aristotelian-inspired concept of human nature, more closely tied to common sense and everyday experience. In the Aristotelian tradition, there is an affirmation of human nature, but without reducing it to the purely natural plane. We may call it a kind of moderate naturalism. The idea of human nature typical of this tradition has clear normative implications, through notions such as those related to the virtue (*areté*), happiness (*eudaimonia*), and function (*ergon*) of the human being. We are talking about developing – and not merely recovering – a certain concept of human nature. In other words, we must bring this concept to the level of our current knowledge. Today, we are in a better position than any of our predecessors to find out what a human being is, thanks to historical advances in the natural, social, and human sciences. That is why it is necessary to develop or bring to this current day a certain very valuable concept of the human being, and not merely to recover it.

To sum up, the human being is, according to Aristotelian tradition, a rational social animal (*zoon politikon logikon*). The method for developing this idea should be to open and explore each of these three boxes⁶.

First of all, the fact that we are animals has profound implications. Humans are not just any kind of rational being, but very precisely animals. This forces us to think and to think about ourselves from the body, from the experience of the animal we are. If, by nature, we are animals, this means, among other things, that we are *vulnerable*, susceptible to harm and suffering, pleasure and pain. It is worth noting that being vulnerable does not make us less human but is part of what is precisely human⁷. “Humans – says bioethicist Lydia Feito from the Complutense University of Madrid – are vulnerable as a condition of our very own nature as people [...] It is an anthropological characteristic that defines us. However, we tend to hide it [...] The pandemic has come to remind us of our vulnerability in a rude and overwhelming way”⁸ (Feito, 2020, p. 20).

The Wuhan virus has produced glaring evidence of our vulnerability. This is evidence that has coincided in time with the transhumanist movement, which advocates for the suppression of human vulnerability. But the suppression of our vulnerability can only be achieved at the cost of our humanity. Let's delve deeper into this⁹.

The term *vulnerable* comes from the Latin, *vulnerabilis*, a word that means susceptible to being hurt. Likewise, in many languages the verb *to hurt* comes from the Latin, *ferire*, which means to perforate or to cut. In other words, that which is vulnerable, may be perforated. In more basic terms, this is the condition of one thing being able to insert itself into another. This logically requires the distinction between interior and exterior. The idea of functional damage is also suggested. Inserting something external into something else is considered a wound to the extent that it causes functional damage to the thing in question. Living beings have an interior and exterior, have semi-permeable barriers that identify them, separate them from their environment and at the same time connect them with it, making them functional, but also, and therefore, vulnerable. The interiority and necessary openness of the living being is what at the same time makes it vulnerable. The separation of the living being from its medium, as well as its individuality, causes an inner face to appear in the most diverse senses and extents: from the spatial enclosure surrounded by a membrane or by skin or by a bone structure, to the intimacy and immunological identity that encloses a self and chemically separates it from others; from the most elementary perception of the environment, to a developed and rich mental activity, whose extreme exponent is the mental and self-conscious intimacy of the human being, his inner life.

It is this, our biological base, that makes us vulnerable. Rocks or concepts are not. Human beings would only cease to be vulnerable if they ceased to be living beings, if they were to become, for example, software, as some transhumanists propose. But if that were to happen, they would obviously stop being human, too. Emmanuel Levinas comes to understand human subjectivity in terms of vulnerability and identifies the latter as a condition of possibility of any form of respect for the human being¹⁰. Recognizing yourself as human means recognizing your-

self as living, and therefore as vulnerable. Consequently, being more vulnerable does not make us less human. All people, whether they are more or less vulnerable, are equally deserving of dignity. That is why, as MacIntyre states, we must ask ourselves both about the animal nature of the human being and its vulnerability, and that is why both issues are crucial to ethics¹¹.

Of course, we must try as much as possible to mitigate our vulnerability and protect ourselves from harm, but the aspiration of absolute invulnerability for humans has some degree of absurdity or contradiction. This lesson should have already been learned from the old story of Achilles's heel: when Achilles was born, his mother, Tethys, tried to make him invulnerable by submerging him in the River Styx. But she held him by the right heel as she dipped him into the water, making that precise point on his body, where Tethys's fingers were grasping him, the one spot that did not get wet and thus remained vulnerable. During the siege of Troy, Paris killed Achilles by shooting a poisoned arrow into his heel. Perfect invulnerability would have come at a price that Tethys was unwilling to pay, because it would have required the mother to let go of her son and abandon him to the current. This story tells us the way forward regarding human vulnerability: we must recognize it and try to mitigate it through self-care and mutual care, knowing that its complete suppression is incompatible with human nature.

Once the subject is identified as vulnerable, we must study the various types of vulnerability that affect it¹². In the case of human beings, we often distinguish between psychosomatic, social, and spiritual vulnerability¹³. Different types of vulnerability are correlated with different risk factors. And, as the Covid-19 disease has shown us, these types of vulnerability, even if conceptually distinguishable, are specifically and intimately interconnected and affect each other. For example, a physical disease can cause mental disorders and vice versa, and both can influence social relationships as well as create crises of meaning. A crisis of meaning may also end up causing different diseases and changes in social relations, and so on. In other words, vulnerability is the possibility of being hurt; when that possibility is updated and an individual is truly hurt at the psychosomatic, social, or spiritual levels, they therefore become more vulnerable to new wounds in any of these aspects. The pandemic, after the damage done to the bodies of those affected, has shaken up social structures and has finally led to a crisis of meaning in those who have experienced closely, or in the first person, a strange death in isolation and with hardly any funeral rites.

In view of this new reality, several divergent lines of action can be taken. We may opt for simply resigning ourselves to it, which particularly harms the most vulnerable. Some governments first proposed a (suicidal) policy of inhibition, a letting the virus roam free. There are also those who have dreamed of post-human utopias of perfect protection. These are dehumanized landscapes, for it is, after all, our human nature that makes us vulnerable. I understand that this line puts at risk the very existence of humanity, and thus violates the categorical imperative set out by Hans Jonas: "[...] there must be a humanity¹⁴". Thus, the best option is to *recognize and mitigate vulnerability*, with particular attention, of course, to those who are most vulnerable.

It is intuitively clear that simple resignation is not a morally acceptable attitude. But the dehumanizing attitude is also susceptible to criticism. It is worth mentioning here some fragments written by Martha Nussbaum (2004). Through these, we may clearly see the post-human landscape that we should face in order to achieve invulnerability, in which our entire conceptual, emotional, and social universe would be upset, with the consequent loss of moral references.

Aristotle once said that if we imagine the Greek gods as depicted in legend – all-powerful, all-seeing creatures who need no food and whose bodies never suffer damage – we will see that law would have no point in their lives [...] We humans need law precisely because we are vulnerable to harm and damage in many ways [...] But the idea of vulnerability is closely connected to the idea of emotion [...] To see this, let us imagine beings who are really invulnerable to suffering [...] Such beings would have no reason to fear [...] They would have no reasons for anger [...] for grief [...] they would not love anything outside themselves [...] Envy and jealousy would similarly be absent from their lives.

Let us now consider, as Nussbaum suggests, “[...] the large role that emotions [...] play in mapping the trajectory of human lives, the lives of vulnerable animals [...] If we leave out all the emotional responses [...] we leave out a great part of our humanity¹⁵”. In short, complete invulnerability opens up a clearly dehumanized landscape, oblivious to everything we commonly know as human nature.

Let us therefore explore the third way, the one where we recognize and mitigate human vulnerability. Here, the goal is to reduce vulnerability as much as possible, with particular attention to the most vulnerable, through a deepening of the human experience, through its full realization, and not by suppressing or overcoming it. Recognizing that we are vulnerable is nothing more than knowing and accepting our own nature. This recognition is already in itself a virtue, and the development of other virtues depends on it. On the other hand, vulnerability is mitigated insofar as we are able to harmoniously integrate and coordinate the essential aspects of the human experience. Let’s see briefly the two that remain.

Secondly, our social status makes us mutually *dependent* and places us in a specific community, *the human family*. The same thing that happened with vulnerability happens to dependence, that is, it does not make us less human, but is precisely a part of what it means to be human. From the field of philosophy, perhaps it’s been Alasdair MacIntyre who has best understood and explained in recent times this aspect of being human. He has been able to develop the ancient Aristotelian idea of the human being as a political animal, until its contemporary formulation as a dependent animal. Even to become autonomous we depend on others, and we put our autonomy at the service of others¹⁶.

Thirdly, we are rational, yes, and this places us in a new spiritual sphere. It includes our ability to think and think of ourselves, to do science and technology, to reflect, to contemplate, and to ponder the rea-

sons for doing and believing. Because we are rational, we ask and we give reasons, we seek explanations and causes, including the most radical and the latest, we deliberate, we decide voluntarily in one direction or another, and we value good and beauty. Here we understand our ability to be rational in a broad and contemporary sense, which includes and integrates emotional intelligence, the contributions of intuition, and in general, wisdom. Thanks to the rational aspect of the human condition, we become *autonomous* subjects, we can give ourselves standards and criteria, and accept or reject in a clear-headed way and of our own free will the guidance we receive from others.

The interesting thing here is that these three dimensions of human nature, which we have so hastily considered, are not reducible from each other nor are they merely juxtaposed. Their mutual relationship is best described by the term integration: each of them completely permeates the other two and differentiates them. Our intelligence is sentient. Our way of perceiving is already modulated by our thinking. Our rationality is social and conversational. It is built only in communication with others. Our animal functions are carried out culturally. Our autonomy, as we said, is at the service of our dependents, and we depend on others to get to build it. In this sense, we must understand the words of the French thinker Paul Ricoeur when he states that autonomy and vulnerability are complementary concepts. Human autonomy is that of a vulnerable being, who recognizes other vulnerable beings in their environment, beings that limit and at the same time enable their autonomy¹⁷. To reach the substantiality that characterizes each individual, we must always keep in mind that the human experience takes place in an integral, unitary, indivisible way in each of us.

The current pandemic reminds us that an individual's aspiration to autonomy must be countered at all times by the recognition of our vulnerability and mutual dependence. In alarming conditions, such as the ones we are living in now, one must aspire, perhaps more than ever and more forcefully, to take care of oneself, not to be a burden to others, to release them from assisting us. Moreover, we understand like never before the meaning of this autonomy: it must be guided precisely towards the care of others, towards the mitigation of human vulnerability. And at the same time, there is no choice but to recognize our close interdependence and vulnerability. All this intensely and vividly sets up an ethics of self-care and mutual care. Every step we take in our homes during quarantine and the heroic work done by the pillars of society teach us that we all depend on each other, that we are part of one great human family; that there is greatness in recognizing this interrelationship, as well as in seeking one's own autonomy, which can do so much to serve others. At times like these, we are faced with the evidence of the importance of having formed strong and stable community groups, networks of friends, of fellow citizens, and, above all, families. All of this is necessary for anyone before, during, and after this and any other pandemic.

What Should We Do? The Cultivation of Virtues

Everything mentioned does not mean that we have not learned anything from the current health situation. But it's been a peculiar kind of learning, a certain form of reminiscence. The pandemic *reminded* us of what we should have learned before, it has shown us more vividly and forcefully what we should not have forgotten. In short, that the future is open and that our moral compass must be our human and personal essence. It seems somewhat elementary, but this change of perspective already definitely puts us outside of modern times, far from the ideology according to which the sciences – including the social sciences – are able to predict with certainty and technologies control safely. This change of perspective also offers us an escape from nihilistic despondency. It is not true that we no longer have a compass: it is our being.

Thus, for any of us, fidelity to our common human nature and to the person that we each are works as a compass. For society as a whole, what serves as a guide is the preservation of the minimum conditions under which the respect for the being can be fulfilled. The latter metaphysical maxim may be translated into more concrete, legal, and political terms: it is ultimately a question of preserving human rights, based on the dignity of each and every member of the human family.

Each person and society at large should then promote the set of virtues that enable human fulfillment, which allow each of us to fulfill the teachings of Pindar. And not because developing virtues is the best – let's put it in terms of a cliché – bet for the future, but because it is the best way to realize our being. In the Aristotelian tradition, it is the practice of virtue, the pursuit of excellence, that allows human realization. Moreover, as an unexpected gift or grace, if we look to the recent past, we realize that the cultivation of virtues would have been the best formula for dealing with the strange experience that is causing us anguish today.

We realize with the new light shed on the plethora of virtues that would have come in handy, that right now they would do us a lot of good, that they have in fact mitigated suffering to the extent that they have been present, that we missed them when we did not find them available and at play, virtues that we should surely have cultivated from time to time and in better circumstances. We have assumed these days that we must count on the unexpected. But it seems that only the cultivation of a character based on virtue prepares us for what we can't even calculate, predict, or perhaps, imagine.

We have emergency laws and orders that come from politicians holding power, from our not always exemplary leaders. But laws are not enough. The sense of duty does not mobilize, let alone sustain action in adverse circumstances. Utilitarian calculations, as we have seen, are not always feasible and are rarely reliable. It is necessary, yes, to weigh the consequences of each of our actions, to attend to what the sense of duty indicates and to observe the laws enacted. But life itself teaches us today that we must go further and approach all this, that there is some-

thing that comes before and after the law, the duty, or the calculation; something that is necessary and which, at the same time, is not formally enforceable; something that depends on people's character, that springs from our nature and ends up solidifying, in the words of Aristotle, into a kind of second nature.

Thanks to this second nature, under the advice of prudence, we may balance the recognition of our vulnerability and dependence with the legitimate aspiration for personal autonomy. "The vulnerability under which we are, live, and develop our lives", writes Lydia Feito, "[...] requires us to exercise our prudence [...] We are vulnerable and, from the recognition of our fragility, we must offer the ethical answer: care, which translates into the obligation of prudent actions¹⁸".

In this second nature, the virtues of care and dependence that have been shown to be so indispensable in recent days are installed. If we look to our common human nature, we will be inclined towards the cultivation of virtues that may lead us to realization and excellence, virtues such as prudence, of course, but also commitment, honesty, strength, temperance, humility, and serenity, generosity in effort, hard work, creativity, good mood, kindness, punctuality, gratitude, austerity in consumption and moderation in general terms, sincerity, tolerance, capacity for suffering, joy, discipline, willingness to obey legitimate authority and so on, to something so modest, but crucial, such as habits of good hygiene and cleanliness. We learn all this with practice and by example. We have faced the experience of the unthinkable because these virtues, to some degree, were already present among us. And we have noticed that if we had cultivated them to a greater extent, the response to the unexpected would have been more satisfactory, we would have saved a good amount of suffering and heartbreak.

At times when the sense of duty became scarce, when time and means were lacking for the calculation of consequences, we have made use of character. We have seen these days illuminating examples of this. To name just a few: healthcare professionals – prominently – those in charge of distribution, public order, teaching, medical research, and a long line of basic functions that prevent collapse have given, are giving, evidence of courage, creativity, hard work, and the capacity for sacrifice. Society at large has also been able to show exemplary displays of gratitude – one of the virtues that MacIntyre links to the recognition of dependence. We all learn when we see a nurse who remains patient after 24 hours on duty or a driver who sacrifices an entire night to ensure supply. From a surprising new social liturgy, a round of applause at dusk, we have learned the virtue of gratitude.

Conclusions

The pandemic we are suffering is a kind of stress test, not only for health systems and for the economy of the planet, but also for different ethical systems¹⁹. The ethics of duty are essential, but in these exceptional circumstances, they have fallen short. In the face of the heroic

efforts that so many people have offered voluntarily and free of charge, the mere notion of duty is miniscule and insufficient. When so many have acted at the level of the supererogatory, the simple appeal to duty becomes an ethics of minimums, somewhat stunted when it comes to dealing with what has befallen us. As for utilitarian calculations, it must be said that they have not successfully endured the stress test, either. These calculations are of little use when all forecasts are going out the window, when the WHO itself, the scientific community, experts, and let alone governments are taking shots in the dark. Nor have the ethics of postmodernity passed the stress test. It's hard to see the virus as a mere social construct. A good part of the relativistic frivolity has evaporated in the face of the raw constancy of the reality hitting us.

Perhaps, for the reasons we have been presenting, the ethics of virtue and care, which do not depend so drastically on attachment to duty, utilitarian calculations, or individual and cultural whims, have better endured stress. The ethics of virtue look to the bottom of human nature. There they find the characteristics of our animal, social, and spiritual condition; there they detect human vulnerability, our mutual dependence, and the legitimate aspiration for personal realization. From this the normative force originates, hence the need for cultivation and development of a second nature, of a virtuous character. Because this character was already present in many, our society has managed to go beyond duty, the prediction of uses, and individual whims. If there's one thing we've lacked, it is that this character should have been present in more people and to a greater extent. In this regard, it is in the cultivation of character where we find the right way to mitigate the human vulnerability that has been so evident in recent times.

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Notes

- 1 A previous version of this article was published in Spanish on *Cuadernos de Bioética*, Madrid, v. 31, n. 102, p. 139-149, 2020.
- 2 Popper and Lorenz (1992).
- 3 Agamben et al. (2020).
- 4 Jonas (1995, p. 200).
- 5 Jonas (1995, p. 95).
- 6 For an in-depth discussion of these ideas, please see Marcos and Pérez (2018).
- 7 Masiá (1997).
- 8 Feito (2020, p. 2).
- 9 I mention here the main ideas presented in Marcos (2015) and in Marcos (2016).
- 10 Levinas (1978, chap III, section 5, p. 120-128); please also see Nicolas Antenat (2003).

- 11 MacIntyre (2001, p. 10). The notions of interior and exterior, as well as that of vulnerability, also apply to non-living entities, such as houses or computers, but not in an analogical or metaphorical way, considering these entities as if they were living beings or extensions in some sense thereof.
- 12 Please see the issue of *Medic* magazine dedicated to *Disability Studies* as a new area of investigation (Ugolini et al. 2013).
- 13 Please see Torralba (2002).
- 14 Jonas (1995, p. 87-88).
- 15 Nussbaum's two quotes come from: Nussbaum (2004, cap. 1).
- 16 MacIntyre (2001, p. 10); Marcos (2013, p. 21-34); Marcos (2012, p. 83-95).
- 17 Ricoeur (1995).
- 18 Feito (2020).
- 19 Marcos (2020).

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