

Spiritual Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The microscopic organism that affected our lives since 2020 has not only had deep consequences on the human health, physical as well as psychological. It has infected also the spiritual soul, throwing a new light on a neglected topic of contemporary discourse, also for metaphysics. The frustration generated by the pandemic distress acts on the anthropological inclination to the world of life, in which is grounded the capacity for interpersonal relations and the search for the experience of the divine (God). The author indicates in the lack of sensing the deeper privation experienced within the pandemic era. This paper is aimed at making a wider reading of the intimate discomforts that social limitations related to the containment of COVID-19.

Key words: pandemic, COVID-19, virus, psychological discomforts, pandemic fatigue, systemic processes, spiritual soul.

PANDEMIC AND THE INTIMATE DISCOMFORT OF THE PERSON

The sudden rising of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global scene was comparable to a shock with multiple systemic implications that affected the social environment as well as the human body (1, 2). After its spreading in 2020, the pandemic is going to become endemic. Although in the Western countries the vaccines have reduced the risk of death or severe consequences of the disease, several variants achieved dominance very rapidly. The rate of transmissibility of Omicron and its variants, in 2022, are causing new surges of Covid-19. A question arises: could we ever be free from the Coronavirus?

This destabilizing scenario – when the worst of pandemic recedes, then a new peak bursts – is at the origin of the multifaceted psychological and psychic discomfort, which fueled the concern of the institutions since the very beginning of the outbreak. In Italy the financial support to people affected with mental illness aka *bonus psicologo (free psychological treatment)* was recognized as a ‘cultural revolution’ in February 2022 (3). Free access to psychological therapies – at the moment only a recommendation for Italian health care-system included in the Pnrr / Piano nazionale di

ripresa e resilienza – was meant, for the Government, to draw greater attention beyond the virus-related diseases, in order to highlight the mental health issues in general, previously largely left apart by public policy. Thus, a new theoretical interest to the interaction mind/body has been acknowledged.

PANDEMIC SHOCK ON PSYCHE

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into light several psychological and psychic distresses, among which have been largely diagnosed restlessness, anxiety, nervousness, panic attacks, demoralization, depressive symptoms, de-realization, de-personalization (4). In Italy about 31% of people showed depressive syndromes virus-related, but a higher rate of the same discomforts (38%) was diagnosed in the ‘quarantine population’ during the first lockdown between March and May 2020. Anxiety as a consequence of isolation, social restrictions and the risk of being infected reached the 57 per cent. Among the youngest population (under 18) post-traumatic symptoms are 48 per cent (5). Since 2020 new discomforts associated with mind/body interaction have been diagnosed. It’s the case of the ‘pandemic fatigue’ (6), whose pathological texture reveals a cluster of processes that move from the lack of psychic energy to resilience. They are 1) perturbation, 2) dissipation, 3) coherence, 4) emergence. I’ll briefly describe

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their main traits.

Perturbation is the process that derives from a shock inflicted on a living organism. Pandemic outbreak shattered our fragile social balance and a microscopic pathogen assaulted the world, basically unprepared to cope with such a traumatic upset. When a perturbation occurs, it is properly the balance of the system to be fractured: in the case of chronic situations, the general instability is amplified. The long-term unpredictability, in physical dynamics as well as in fluid dynamics – two domains from which systemic thinking borrowed the term perturbation – is a typical behavior of deterministic or non-deterministic chaos. This dynamic step could be found at the beginning of pandemic fatigue: it corresponds to the phase of the exposure to the outbreak. The never-ending red alert about the pathogen spreading reinforces the instability of the person, making all its functions more vulnerable.

With dissipation - a term that systemic thinking has received from the *dissipative structures* introduced in thermodynamics by the Nobel Ilya Prigogine - a double simultaneous movement occurs, characterized by the coexistence of change and stability. This process is strictly linked to perturbation, because it originates in non-equilibrium conditions, that's to say in systems where a shock (or another cause) gave rise to instability. In classical thermodynamics, typical movement of dissipative systems is rooted in the ability to transfer a large amount of energy to the environment. It's properly the production of entropy to guarantee the stability of such systems. It's properly in the process of releasing energy that new configurations or "emergent properties" develop and reach the surface. As Minati notes: "The attribute dissipative refers to systems where energy dissipation in non-equilibrium conditions allows the emergence of ordered structures" (7).

This step corresponds, in the phenomenological description of pandemic fatigue, to the symptoms of distress suffered both physically and mentally by the individuals. If fatigue as a physiological reaction of the body to an effort finds its balance very quickly, through the rest, the exposure to a chronic stress originates a non-transient state of exhaustion. In order to imagine such a phenomenon, we can think of a vortex in a flux of running water or atmospheric phenomena such as hurricanes. Dissipation is a process that focuses on the very heart of fatigue. Unlike the almost negative vision with which fatigue is perceived, this process suggests a flourishing for the individual. In fact, it calls for the reaction of the whole system, physical and spiritual. In this perspective, the loss of hope that seems so frequent in pandemic fatigue should be replaced by a positive thought: a new coherence is going to be built throughout self-exhaustion.

The *self-organization* of dissipative systems is at the origin of the emergences or systemic properties (or II type systemic

properties), which result from the interactions within systems and between systems and environment. Emergences should be seen "as continuous and irregular, but coherent, e.g. dynamically correlated, variable in the acquisition of new structures and nonequivalent processes of self-organization" (7). Pandemic fatigue, as well as fatigue in general, dwells this place in the interplay among systems (virus, individuals, society, safe issues et.). The difficulty to define is due to the fact that it cannot be reduced to a symptom, nor it can be related to the sole physical or psychical domain: it surpasses all of them although being deeply interwoven with both environments.

Another consequence of self-organization of perturbed systems is the search for *coherence*. This phase supports the unitary and integrated response of the system to disturbances/perturbations, avoiding isolation or the independent organization of some parts or functions. The loss of coherence clarifies why a process of emergence may be extinguished as the consequence of an inconsistent organization. This process is visible in the social response to the pandemic outbreak. It corresponds, on the social environment, to the immunization process of the organism. It's an effort of the whole person, a challenge of transformation/adaptation. When people were locked down in order to avoid the spreading of the virus, people had to leave abruptly apart jobs, daily activities, interpersonal relations with relatives and friends. Despite these changes, life was going although individuals were forbidden to leave their houses. People continue to work at home, through the connection with their offices, connecting with the colleagues on a video chat; online educational portals gave children the possibility to feel once again at school; we could go shopping through specific digital networks.

As an effort, although a positive way to cope with a major shock, this phase asks for a deep interplay with the environment (other individuals and communities) because it is properly this step to reinforce demotivation in following the rules. Sharing reasons behind restrictions, making the audience able to acknowledge the decisions is, at this stage, the most powerful challenge. Only the highest level of fairness in recommendations and restrictions can reduce the fatigue of coherence.

Pandemic not only affected psyche. Consequences are also reported within a wider anthropological frame, precisely they involved the inner ground of the person. I'm talking about the spiritual soul, whose power is linked to the psychological/psychic domain, however it is not comparable with it.

THE DISCOMFORT OF THE SPIRITUAL SOUL IN TIME OF PANDEMIC

Removed from everyday life, underestimated, misunderstood, the spiritual soul questions more than ever in the COVID-19

era. If psyche can be identified with the processes that allow the individual to be aware of himself and the world of life, then what is the spiritual soul? It is not this paper's aim to make a history of the concept of soul, a term referring at large to that principle which in a special and exclusive way connects transient and changing parts, organizes and makes the humans properly individuals (8, 9). Spiritual soul, in philosophical terms, is a word that despite its semantic intricacy, traditionally indicates a function of the human being that cannot be reduced to the empirical. In metaphysics spiritual soul is characterized by *transcendence*, or the inclination of the self towards otherness. It is a kind of 'instinctual' movement to the other individuals, in which is grounded also the search for God as the very principle of the universe. Soul and psyche are not two separate domains; they are deeply involved. Nevertheless, the need for transcendence, as explained before, belongs exclusively to the spiritual soul.

In the human person, this metaphysical trait collects all the properties of the human subject, from rationality (10) to emotion, from intuition to will. Thus, any activities of the spiritual soul fully express what a person is, mainly the quality called 'humanity'. Furthermore, its transcendence brings into light the impossibility, for humans, to consider themselves as self-sufficient. A person always needs to be in relation. The spiritual soul underlines this original truth. Such a protrude outside the person to the otherness, for reaching out a higher level of personal fullness, might be imagined as an open question. Kant, in *What it means to orient oneself* in thought (11) lead back this impulse of transcendence to human reason, as an ascend towards the immeasurable.

The pandemic, as noticed before, brought the spotlight on the interior of the human person. I'll seek to investigate into some relevant consequences of the COVID-19 on the spiritual soul's domain, in order to argue that 'spiritual pandemic' is 1) a pathology of spiritual soul and 2) it gives rise to an intimate dryness that affects both the interactions with other humans and the relationship with God.

THE MASK, THE LOCKDOWN AND THE LIMITATIONS

Person is a multifaceted term of uncertain meaning. Traditionally it is considered linked to *prosopon*, a Greek word indicating the mask of performing artists. The obligation to equip oneself with individual protection, in times of pandemic, by covering one's mouth and nose, has had some consequences, on a spiritual level: it has been built a defense wall, a sort of barrier between person and person that makes all of us less identifiable. Social distances have also increased the relational distancing among individuals, regulated by the measures for the containment of the contagion. The imposed, repeated lockdowns, limited social interactions. The need

to continue school activities in safety intensified the use of distance learning for students, with recognized limits in terms of learning and, even more so, in that of interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

For a few months, public health measures necessitated the closure of worship; even the ordinary religious activities of the Catholic Church – the mass and the practice of the sacraments – suffered the effects of the lockdown, depriving the faithful of the relationship in presence with the sacred. Another spiritual limitation is strictly linked to impossibility to visit the beloved ones hospitalized because of COVID-19. An imposed distance at the origin of the deepest void (12) in case of death of relatives and friends, a discomfort hard to process for the mourner, whose 'natural' abilities to go through mourning are not enough to cope with it.

SPIRITUAL PANDEMIC AS A LACK OF SENSING

To briefly resume, spiritual pandemic escapes the limits of the psychological and psychic discourse. It could be understood as a loss of the spiritual power of the person, whose life is grounded in transcendence. In common with psychological/psychic diseases this discomfort shares the experience of an inner void. However, its texture is anthropological and depends upon the impoverishment of sensing, which reflects on the human conduct as a main component of the will.

For the Aquinas (13) – I especially refer to the *Quaestio* 15 of the *Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae Pars – the *act of sensing* cannot be compared to a mere perception or a sensitive feeling: it primarily allows the living individuals to have the idea of the object itself and, secondarily, it is a crucial component of any actions. Sensing activates the ethical conduct through these passages, according to the *Quaestio* 15: 1) it makes a direct involvement with the *res* (the 'thing', the 'object', reality in general); 2) it provides a taste of the *res*; 3) both the intellectual knowledge and the appetitive tension stands at the very heart of moral judgement.

Therefore, the act of sensing entails a peculiar experience of good, more sensitive than intellectual: it allows the human being to be acquainted with something given (*positum*), a pre-moral good that orients to something tasted as valuable, moving the will to it. The person forges the idea of otherness and of God through the reflexive movement outside her proper self: in other words, it exists something that is not reducible to himself.

Sensing cannot be simply reduced to what results from the bodily experience – to a "résumé de notre expérience corporelle" – nor a passive attitude to the world-of-life. Sensing occurs in intention (15), a kind of knowledge that

allows to reach a goal. Since the early childhood, the act of sensing provides the experience of values, a building block of moral agency (16). Furthermore, sensing takes a part – a crucial part – in the uprising of moral judgment.

Every time we put distances between the human being and the world of life the spontaneous, metaphysical attitude of sensing is shuttered. One could object that a face mask is a tool that increases life-opportunities more than a limitation of them. Being honest, two years of continuous anti-virus rules have deeply reflected on the interpersonal approach that characterizes the human conduct.

CONCLUSION

This paper was aimed at exploring the consequences of COVID-19 on the intimate texture of the human beings, making a distinction between psychological/psychic diseases and the spiritual discomfort. The first group of distresses collects phenomena that follow several, interacting processes of mind/body life: the discussion focused especially on the pandemic fatigue. Spiritual pandemic, on the contrary, is a term related to the difficulty of the humans to be fully persons. The social limitations due to the pandemic made all of us more cautious in our social interactions; this behaviour, which seems so natural in a pandemic frame, gave rise to the impoverishment of sensing, the act of grasping reality, from which we achieve both the idea of the otherness and the inclination to the divine (God, faith, religion).

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