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Antidotes to Fragility

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Abstract: The Covid crisis has revealed profound fragility in advanced societies. And yet antidotes to this fragility exist in biological, cultural and relational fields and allow us to think of a homeostasis between fragility and vitality.

1. It is an honor and a pleasure for me to comment on Natalie Depraz's target article. Natalie gives us a meditation on fragility based on the depth of her own experience, analyzed through a self-explicitation according to Pierre Vermersch's method. She emphasizes that this perception of fragility was also an opportunity for her to feel more alive.

2. I would like first to analyze the fragility of what has happened on a social level in France, but also in Western countries. Huddled up in a comfort that we imagine to be definitive, infused with the certainties of a science that everyone talks about, but that very few know about, we were surprised by something that is commonplace in humanity: a virus was causing an unusual (but compared to the number of deaths from the Spanish flu and the great epidemics of plague or typhus, relatively low) number of deaths. And we saw the extreme fragility of advanced societies in the face of the unknown, of uncertainty. Our societies are now hardly capable of accepting that there are aspects that science cannot know. They have even more difficulties in accepting that the meaning of life will not be given by science. As Edmund Husserl pointed out,

“In the distress of our life – this is what we hear everywhere – this science has nothing to tell us. The questions that it excludes by principle are precisely the questions that are the most burning in our unhappy time, for a humanity abandoned to the upheavals of destiny. These are the questions that concern the meaning or lack of meaning of all human existence.” (Husserl 2004: 18)

And there we have experienced the acquired fragility of societies, anesthetized by scientific eschatology.

3. Another fragility has also become visible, that of our reason. Faced with “nescience,”¹ faced with this unacceptable unknown, a *tohu wa-bohu* of discordant

¹ Nescience is “the point of not knowing that defies the uncertainty in its very nullity. In other words, nescience is the certainty of not knowing, quasi-scientific certainty, because it removes from the soul the incomprehension, or rather the ataxia, that it can at first feel” (Riado 2012: 16, my translation). Nescience is related to the Platonic concept of the “I-don't-know-what” taken up by philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch.

voices coming from pseudo-experts, hysterical journalists, and more or less competent politicians has generated a surprising number of paradoxical injunctions, such as those used by narcissistic perverts² to keep their victims under their control (Hurni & Stoll 2003). In addition to the paradoxical injunctions, other perverse processes appeared such as the significant increase in the control of the populations and the massive guilt-tripping of those who did not respect certain rules which often appeared absurd or inconsistent. Thus, the “global pervert processes present in our society”³ has thus increased, making psychological victims in great numbers. These victims can be found in psychology or psychiatry consulting rooms: anxiety disorders have increased not only because of the fear of Covid, but above all because of the impossibility of choosing among this jumble of injunctions, advice and pseudo-certainties. To the fragility of fear and of the absence of meaning, has been added the fragility generated by the undecidable.

4. It is significant that the fragility of which Natalie speaks has found a resonance in the ecological problematic. Natalie uses the word “apocalyptic” (§30). There is the fusion of two terrors, of two anxieties projected into two different temporalities: the quasi-present with Covid, the quasi-future for global warming. To this double temporality of terror was opposed the temporality of the thick and stretched present, the temporality of “Jouvernex.” This desert, this emptiness, this impression of loss of spirituality show the effective place taken by prayer, or yoga, or meditation in our current accelerated, overflowing lives. When the temporality changes – as Natalie says – “such spiritually useful and beneficial resources seem to become ineffective” (§13). In other words, weakness, a sense of absurdity and melancholy appear in this sudden change in the texture of temporality. This is what psychiatrist and phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski finds in melancholy:

“[O]ur life is oriented towards the future and this orientation goes hand in hand with a feeling of fulfillment [...] It is the orientation of our life towards the future that gives it meaning; where this orientation is lacking, everything seems to us to be equal, stupid, without rhyme or

² Perversion is a narcissistic personality disorder. In the Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental disorders, version n° 5 (DSM V), the perverse personality has 4 characteristics: absence of empathy, use of others, emotional and affective coldness, egocentrism. Three forms are described: the character pervert (denial of the victim, control and ascendancy, enjoyment of the imposed suffering), the sexual pervert (so called paraphilia: sexual arousal during the perverted scenarios, eroticized enjoyment), the narcissistic pervert (denial and discrediting of the victim, victimization, presence of a social base).

³ “What is a thought crossed by perversion, what is an individual or group functioning situated at the edge of perversion ? It is a thought that ends up being ignorant of temporality, of generational transmission, of inheritance, of the heterogeneous. It is a thought that ends up cancelling or denying any historical anchorage, by nourishing and diffusing the auto-engendering, the self-creation. It makes us live in an immediate present, separated from any past, in the enjoyment of the moment. Its future is in the present. The limits that establish an order between the things and the words by which the differentiation (between the sexes notably) that strives toward the recognition of otherness, are slowly dissolved by the ‘perverse thought.’” (Gadeau 2015: 174f, my translation)

reason; the questions why all of this? for what purpose? arise in mind” (Minkowski 2013: 282f).

The critical time of Covid, the confinement, the cessation of the usual perspectives generated strong melancholic processes in many people.

5. Covid has provoked this fragility of our future, this uncertainty as to what will happen, this radical undecidability in the face of an unknown process, not understood by science. And thus, this pandemic has triggered, in society, besides a diffuse anxiety, many melancholic processes, in particular, in the young people whose future, already badly assured, has appeared very worrying. As Natalie points out in §19, the process is similar to the announcement of a diagnosis of serious illness, or to the decompensation of a chronic pathology. Could we say that our Western society is so sick that the uncertainty of the future puts it in such a state? The Covid epidemic was the revelation of a serious illness of the West: the loss of the meaning of life, and the anguish of facing the ontological impossibility of science bringing any answer to this absence of meaning. Science mainly uses a reductionist and physicalist approach, resulting in a loss of fine understanding of life and the meaning of life (Rey 2003). Another aspect of this disease is the progressive disjunction between (scientific and technical) knowledge and cultural thought as self-development of life (Henry 1987).

6. Biological sciences explain very little of life (and mental life), because they place it under the aegis of computation and disregard the problematics of experience and of being (see Martin Heidegger’s theses on science, Heidegger 2013: 172–187). While our society wallows in the publicity (the public world) of social networks, verbose interviews, dating sites, we do not want to “see clearly in consciousness,” we do not want to accept that we are beings-for-death, that our parents, our children, our friends are also beings-for-death. We have forgotten what makes us authentic beings, opening our eyes to the inexorable (Heidegger 1986).

7. Yet, in my work as a medical doctor, I have become aware of how solid and resistant humans are from a biological point of view. Of course, one can insist on the fragility of a brain that dies after three minutes of stopping perfusion. Yet, at the same time, one can only be astonished by the resistance, the resilience, that a human organism can show. Compensation processes, which are omnipresent in biology, and processes of adaptation to the context are constantly at play in human life. And that is why life expectancy is increasing, once the great dangers of epidemics have been overcome, once peace has been achieved, once humans have had enough food. And even in very old people, the fragility is not so obvious, given the aging of the organs.

8. Paradoxically, it is the psychology of the human being that seems to be the most fragile part in her, with its attendant somatic disorders. And this is what Natalie’s text shows: it seems that, in her case, the psychological fragility has exceeded the organic fragility. This is also what the experience of psychotherapy shows. We see people who have few organic diseases, even when they have experienced the worst atrocities (rape, incest, beatings). And even if psychological disorders are very often accompanied by

somatic disorders, the latter do not generally present with the same intensity as the psychological alterations.

9. Natalie talks about fragility as a becoming. I share this view, in part. I rather think that there is an oscillation between fragility and solidity in human beings and that this oscillation is constant, even in the most apparently solid subjects. Fragility and solidity are intertwined and, in a certain way, are the site of a homeostasis. In bipolar disorders (or bipolar psychoses), this homeostasis is broken to the detriment of one of the two poles. It should be noted to what extent the problem of fragility or solidity is linked to mood and feelings: this is what Natalie's text shows us. The experiential approach uncovers this entanglement better than the conceptual approach, because it embodies it.

10. Also, I would like to insist on an essential point in clinical practice. This is the concept of "élan vital" developed by Henri Bergson (2008: 88–98) and taken up by Minkowski. We can see very well, in Natalie's case, the reappearance of the "élan vital" (§§22f), that is to say, this surge of life that emerges again. Viruses are very good experimental situations for feeling what the "élan vital" is. You are at the bottom of your bed, you are fragile, you feel lost. And suddenly, in 24 or 48 hours, you regain your dynamism, your desire to do things, your projects, your enthusiasm. In my opinion, the "élan vital" is the natural antidote to the feeling of fragility. It is this "élan vital" that Natalie experiences in §§30–32 when she speaks of "living" as opposed to "surviving."

11. In my experience of confinement and this pandemic, my own physical fragility (I am a subject at risk) has been constantly compensated for by the practice of and listening to music. The contact with my instrument, the sharing of my conscious streams with the streams of consciousness of the composers of the 17th and 18th centuries (Schütz 2007), the search for the right sonority, all this opens a space of a trance in which the fragility of the moment fades and then dissolves. Even more, living music in this way relativizes anguish, brings us "to the things themselves" in a different way from phenomenology. This is what the prisoners of the concentration camps did repeatedly, in much worse conditions, when they sang or played music.

12. Finally, fragility fades, is reduced in love or conjugal relationships. In this, one feels less fragile. In other words, loneliness increases frailty. The solitude of the elderly people, during the confinement, led them to irreversible physical decompensation. As soon as the other, the friend, is in front of you, talks, smiles, the fragility becomes less. It acts like a caress on the soul. That acts like a prayer, "which is born of the need to affirm the spiritual existence of our being" (Minkowski 2013: 102).

Conclusion

13. There are very effective antidotes to fragility: they are attitudes, dispositions of the spirit that liberate the impeded "élan vital". These are all human (art, love, friendships) or spiritual (prayer, music) relationships that generate resonance processes such as those described by Hartmut Rosa (2018). To the solidity of our biology are thus added

psychological and spiritual adjuvants that relativize fragility, force us to turn towards something else, or towards others, and free us from anguish.

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