

Some Reflections on the Threat of the Coronavirus

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This morning, I hear silence. The street is quiet, there is nobody. You have to go on foot to the next store to find a waiting line made up of people watching each other at a distance, some of them bundled up in their scarves. The radio emits its unique mantra and the threat passes through our ears and into the end of our nights. I now listen to my patients who have accepted this arrangement, by telephone, and these words, in thin voices, look for their path in a new way. No longer a matter of aligning themselves with the analyst, words seek to make a place for themselves, to anchor themselves and reflect. I punctuate it with displays of my presence, sometimes just to say that I am here. I experience a different privacy between myself and the person who is speaking to me, I often close my eyes to concentrate on the voice. I know them for the most part but there are also new requests occurring during this time, whose urgency is aggravated by the context. Some of them ask to see me via video applications; I accept this for the first contact. Others don't want that or don't ask for it.

Astonishingly, many people like confinement, this retreat into self, within the cocoon of their insides, this time which can be used for introspection, this time that is out from the control of professional relationships, this rest that silences the hubbub of barely studios classes, public transports, the commute and the daily grind, this interim detour from attachments. Each finds a new use of the time. They sometimes also panic, faced with this void, but that remains exceptional.

Some intellectuals and writers express the need of some form of confinement to write, work, or create. Just as spiritual retreats represent a particular quest of retreating from the world, in silence amplified by a monastery and sheltered from the noises of the world in a place inhabited by spirituality. At the extreme, there is imprisonment, as experienced by people deprived of their freedom in tight spaces. These outliers exist but are chosen by some and imposed on others. The eulogy of confinement provoked unavoidable anger for those who do not need solitude, and towards the people who think it's great. One cannot diminish this experience, which is something both private and shared.

Act Two:

Progressively coming out of confinement brings us from a time where all relations in the presence of others were forbidden to a time of new possibility but also to one of its impossibility: the Nietzschean possible-impossible, God is dead once again and we are faced with dizzying intersubjectivity. While shut in, we were able to believe that everything would become possible again, but out of confinement, each is alone when faced with the difficulty of organizing their relationships.

We were not born alone – there is a body that hosted us, family that desired us, the mark of our incurable dependency, but a condition for our aptitude for relationships. We must again organize our meetings with others with or without masks, the unseen danger could indeed live beneath any one of them, awakening our fears of the big bad wolf from childhood, the animal that threatens to devour us.

Confinement plunged us into a protective bubble by signaling that the danger was outside. This danger not only threatens our physical health but also our psychic health and our relationships. It is

contagious, and the contagion is contained by protective actions, but the fear is not always contained by these barriers. The fear needs to be written down somewhere, an unseen danger is indeed more terrifying than a danger that can be delineated. Words are needed to catch the wolf.

Thus, many have tolerated this regressive withdrawal into the protective belly of their habitat very well. I do not want to underestimate those who suffocated inside a shared space, too small, or those who did not attend sessions with psychoanalysts or psychologists. The extreme injustice of social inequalities has become a reality that cannot be dismissed or brushed aside.

A shared experience gathered us together. This challenge seems to have fostered empathy and blurred the differences in social classes by highlighting the injustice of confinement situations, and the cynical fatalism of capitalism. We made heroes out of service workers. Some caretakers working at the hospital that I met during this period had to stifle their fear, since they are heroes! Was capitalism gagged for a moment in acceptance of an economic crisis to preserve the health of all? Political choices will continue to be examined and discussed with a magnifying glass. Most of the world was derailed by what happened to us.

Humans are not the masters of their own homes. After the injuries inflicted by the discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, and the Freudian unconscious (the ego is not the master in its own house), the injury that was just inflicted by capitalism, the destroyer of our ecosystem, may be forgotten tomorrow. However, there are lessons to think about from this episode that expose human fragility and need for omnipotence. The fragility of humans is also their chance, as psychoanalysts know.

Some questions remain unanswered, and the replies to this upheaval will not stop coming. One of these questions is as follows:

How do we live together, keeping in mind the distance prescribed by the rules? The boundaries between our retreats and our shared spaces are open again. The mask pushes the other away, behind this defense, at an agreed-upon distance. Again, I think of the idea of the face or visage that Levinas spoke about, this resistant humanity that cannot be destroyed. The face speaks; it bears meaning to decode, it is our otherness, another version of our subjectivity. What does the mask lead to, the mask that impedes access to another person's world, this port of entry between close relations, a face cut in half. But distance can be a new way to look at what comes from the exterior, what is exposed and hidden in the same movement, becoming aware of the absolute nakedness of all connection. This encounter is not so frequent. Some analysts stop the work at the moment when they rightly encounter the desire of the other person, found in the character of the analyst.

Coming out of confinement makes us face the enigma of others, and maybe also the enigma that we are to ourselves.

Translation: Benji Muskal