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PSYCOANALYSIS IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

Psychoanalysis can be very helpful in order to define the individual and group defense mechanisms that are a hindrance to be aware of the serious problems we must deal with today. Among these problems, one of the most urgent now is certainly the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak that starts to influence our daily lives. It is impossible to talk about individual imagination without having in mind the collective imagination at its basis. It is a simple fact that individual and collective imaginations are in mutual co-determination. Further, we cannot consider the image of an environment only as an external world, not depending on the representation we have of it in our internal world.

I think that, more than any other theory and practice, psychoanalysis must comprehend why, before the evidence of a damage of which it is not clear neither the length nor the dangerousness, the humankind is almost unable to figure out what happened, what is happening, and what could still happen. The humankind swings between panic and indifference, catastrophism and skepticism. But it should look at the recent

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events with a bit of alarmism, that is for sure, but neither too optimistically nor too indifferently nor too catastrophically.

It is evident that persons act many defence mechanisms, like splitting, intellectualization, negation, repression, suppression, displacement, and disavowal. Every defense mechanism provides a solution that hides the anxiety coming from the awareness of a danger that cannot be immediately stopped. In Kleinian terms, it seems that we assist to an example of regression to the paranoid-schizoid position. The risk is to not give importance to each depressively preventive and/or reparative action and hinders the principle of the ethics of coexistence. I refer to the ethical dimension of our mind, that specific dimension that makes it human.

About these points, I find particularly interesting and thought-provoking the considerations of Anna Ferruta (2020). These considerations focus on the pleasure of personal responsibility, of taking care of our conditions as humans as an antidote to fear and indifference. This pleasure and the capacity of re-establishing the contact with the emotional experience of trust in a caregiver can allow us to uncover unknown energies and use them to secure ourselves and other people.

About the complex confusion we are experiencing in these days, I stress the relevance of a continuous discussion with other forms of knowledge and expertise and languages. I think that this can be done without any pretentious conquering ambitions or, on the

contrary, without any search for a totalizing harmony, but with the certainty of the importance of the psychoanalytic culture and experience, that can offer resources, tools, and processes able to constructively face the challenges the Coronavirus disease outbreak puts us.

The conversation among different scientific and cultural languages can occur only in terms of hospitality and respects. Only in this way, it would be possible to accept the thoughts and the feelings of other disciplines and to structure various and original forms of language and experience. It is worth noting that these forms cannot be the sum of the beginning languages and experiences: it is something emerging from them, having a proper configuration and an autonomous and original life.

A more evolved and developed use of one's own ideological, scientific, cultural, or personal beliefs can lead to unsaturated positions and to reparative tendencies. In these tendencies, concern and responsibility for the life and the destiny of the individual and the community predominate (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1975).

Albert Einstein seems to have written on the blackboard of his office at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey:² "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." Einstein's quote is

² At least as William Bruce Cameron reports in his 1963 book.

significant because it stresses the role that emotional subjective features play in the natural sciences.

I believe that many epidemiologists and scientists hosted in the television debates should consider Einstein's words. This is because they do not realize that the crude and dramatic objective description of the disaster coming over us does not consider the power of our individual and group defense mechanisms. These mechanisms are hindrances to our awareness not only of the objective damage we received, but also of the damage we can provoke.

The question is: how can we face the strong contradiction between the image of progress, the unstoppable and unlimited development, on the one hand, and the lockdown zones [in Italy they are called "zone rosse" (red areas)], the limitations to our social relationships, the reduction or even the loss of our comfortable and common habits, the apocalyptic economic forecasting, and the updates on the progressive increase of the victims, on the other hand?

Jacques Press (2019) stresses the many difficulties we must face towards a new and critical reality. He asks in which manner we can think when our house burns. In this case, there is a hiatus between the need of an urgent action related to a critical situation and the collapse of our mental functioning, particularly in a context we are actively destructing. He argues that there is a serious risk of concrete theorizing, that is, to make adhere the

psychoanalytic concepts in an uncritical manner to a situation that requires new ways of thinking because of its high complexity.

Pierre Fédida (2007) argues that, when we have to face a new reality, we must think with new tools which, in front of a new reality, it is mandatory to think with tools appealing to both what is known and to what is not known about the context. It is worth noting that, in order for being efficacious, these tools must be based on what is known but, at the same time, they must consider the new contexts and be able to deal with them. In this sense, Fédida suggests that the analyst's role is to imagine what another person had experienced.

This means to use imagination even when what appears in front of us look like a hole, a blank image, an emptiness without a cavity. More radically, this means to imagine what is disappeared and taken apart, the deletion of traces and clues (Galiani, 2009).

According to René Kaës (2013), we must try new analyses, build new mental tools up, propose new modes of comprehension allowing to again and provisionally think the relationship with that stranger we chose as our way of being in the world.

I report some considerations of Freud (1915, p. 273) about the war. I believe they represent very well the feelings we have during this Coronavirus outbreak. There is a lot of perplexities, confusion, difficulties to express clear judgments.

“In the confusion of wartime in which we are caught up, relying

as we must on one-sided information, standing too close to the great changes that have already taken place or are beginning to, and without a glimmering of the future that is being shaped, we ourselves are at a loss as to the significance of the impressions which press in upon us and as to the value of the judgements which we form. We cannot but feel that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest. Science herself has lost her passionless impartiality;(...). Probably, however, our sense of these immediate evils is disproportionately strong, and we are not entitled to compare them with the evils of other times which we have not experienced.”

In this 1915 essay, Freud also notes that, during the wartime, it is common to see a reduction of the neurotic disorders. This appears to be confirmed by the data of the “affected areas”, in which there is a diminishment of hypochondria leaving room sometimes to a healthy and mature concern, sometimes to an increase of the panic symptoms.

Some of Freud’s reflections on the anticipation of mourning are farsighted and can be found in those attitudes considering the contagion as something inevitably leading to death.

At the beginning of “On Transience” [1916 (1915), pp. 305-306], when he describes a walk with a friend and a famous poet, Freud writes: “(...) through a smiling countryside (...). As regards the

beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal. (...) A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely.”

Freud articulates a fundamental aspect of the experience related to the changes we are forced to, and to their consequences and fears: the anticipatory mourning and the risk of the withdrawal of affection from those objects felt as damaged or damageable, that is, that mental condition that can find its expression in apathy. On Transience suggests that the environment and affectively invested objects can be experienced in a peculiar atmosphere of loss and fear of the end. The poet is only a passive witness of a possible future destruction and certainly experiences the mourning. But he does not work through the mourning: he uses a narcissistic defense to avoid the real and painful working through of the mourning by anticipating it. In this sense, beauty is lost in advance. Freud does not accept this in any way and proposes to repair and recreate the internal and external internal world. He concludes his essay with these words (p. 307): “When once the mourning is over, it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before.”

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) Freud argues that it is

necessary to maintain individual limitations in the construction of civilization. Thus, he seems to put the basis of an ethics of collaboration and solidarity in which everyone must renounce something for the common good. Sublimation, prudence, sharing, respect, taking care, management, responsibility. These are the virtues through which we could cope with the current difficulties. All these virtues express at different levels the need of a drive renunciation.

The thought-provoking reflections of Freud should help us when the governments and the scientific authorities ask us to renounce to a part of our freedom (for example, of moving and being in physical contact with the other people) in the name of the common good.

In the exergue of the last chapter of his *Attention and Interpretation* (1970, p. 125), Bion refers to the Negative Capacity by referring to a part of the letter the English poet John Keats to their brothers George and Thomas of the 21st December 1817 on “what quality went to form a Man of Achievement.” The Negative Capacity is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact ad reason.”

This Negative Capacity permits to tolerate the differences, the changes of the points of views, the uncertainties in the searching of the adequate preventive and therapeutic solutions. It is a capacity that permits to be ourselves and to maintain alive in the

persons the desire to comprehend and learn without the need to feel the void at any cost.

The words of Keats and the reflections of Bion are advices to deal with the vicissitudes of existence by accepting the uncertainty and the complexity, by avoiding the anti-economical illusion of thinking to be able to manage what it is actually unmanageable. If we easily try to reduce something unknown to something known, what is incongruous to what is congruous, we run the risk to be partners in crime with the resistances related to anxiety and to detach from a non-immediate solution of the problems.

In Transformations (1965) Bion already pointed out that the nothing is an indication of those mental processes through which we can tolerate the limitations of knowledge on the one hand, and avoid saturating them through pseudoscientific arrogance on the other. Further, we cannot transform them into nothing because of our inability to tolerate the lack of the no-thing.

In 1987 Bion returns on the risks of not applying the Negative Capacity to the analytic work:

“If it is true that the human being, like nature, abhors a vacuum, cannot tolerate empty space, then he will try to fill it by finding something to go into that space, presented by his ignorance. The intolerance of frustration, the dislike of being ignorant, the dislike of having a space that is not filled, can stimulate a precocious and premature desire to fill the space. (...) In other words, the practising analyst has to decide whether he is

promulgating a theory, or a space-filler indistinguishable from a paramnesia. (...) The question is if these paramnesias, the answers immediately comprehensible, those that can be used to fill the space of our ignorance, lead to an extreme danger; if the powers of the human mind are equal to their being destructive.” (1987, pp. 301-303)

Further, in Cogitations (1991, p. 195) Bion stresses the importance “(...) of awareness of incoherent elements and the individual’s ability to tolerate that awareness.” We have seen that Freud’s and Bion’s reflections are articulated and deep and useful for the today situation. More precisely, they allow us to consider how, in the today vicissitudes related to the Coronavirus outbreak, it is necessary that psychoanalysis must have its part in the development of a community ethics.

Every genuine progression challenges our capacity to tolerate the uncertainty of the “truths in transit” (Horovitz, 2007), by avoiding having the final and definitive solution at hand. They are small truths, probably slightly larger than a babble expressing a desire. However, we cannot exclude these truths because they support and promote psychic transformations. They can be usefully and deeply explored provided they do not lose their significance, that is, that status of truth in transit towards that solution of the difficulties that requires time and patience.

Psychoanalysts should contribute to maintain alive the capacity to think and dream a better future and to engage and give their contribution to give value to our sense of proportion and our sobriety. They should contribute to react to our feelings of disaster, of the end of the world as we know it that in these moments can take us by sincerely looking at the negative aspects of our existence and by having the possibility to live them with reflective consciousness through the patient and continuous work of symbolization.

At the end of *The Invisible Cities* (1972, p. 165) Italo Calvino makes Marco Polo say:

“The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

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