SYMPOSIUM: COVID-19

Not all Bad: Sparks of Hope in a Global Disaster

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Abstract The focus of discussion about the ethical issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the great suffering to which it has given rise. However, there may be some unexpected positive outcomes that also emerge from the global disaster. The rupturing of entrenched systems and processes, the challenging of certainties that seemed beyond question, and the disruption of the assumed consensus of modernity may contribute to a rediscovery of the challenges that compose an ethical life. Elements of such a process are evident in the surge of community support and mutual caring, of spontaneous acts of joyous solidarity, of suspension of past conflicts, and exploration of new forms of reconciliation. The experiences are tentative and the outcomes uncertain, but at least for a moment the hope of a new way forward has been raised.

Keywords COVID-19 · Coronavirus · Epidemic · Pandemic · Hope · Power · Resistance · Community · Music · Song · Reconciliation · Microethics · Ethics

As would be expected, the focus of discussion about the ethical issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the great suffering to which it has given rise. The terrible toll—millions of people infected and hundreds of thousands dead—has been difficult to come to terms with, as have the pain, fear, and uncertainty experienced by patients, families, health workers, and many others across the world. The misery has been compounded by economic dislocation, including interruption of services and massive unemployment, bringing much social life to a halt and raising the possibility of widespread homelessness and starvation, even in wealthy, developed countries. The lockdown has kept elderly people alone and isolated in their homes; families are separated; children can't see their parents, and grandparents can't see their grandchildren. Schools and cultural and sporting activities have been suspended. As all this has happened, the police have been granted unprecedented powers. Citizens going about their business are stopped and questioned. Houses are raided. Democratic freedoms formerly taken for granted are suspended.

These are, of course, all seriously negative outcomes, even if it is accepted that the extreme risks posed by the pandemic justify such exceptional measures. Further, it is widely agreed that both disease and the measures to respond to it will generate effects that most likely will endure long after the epidemic itself has passed. The mourning processes will take time, shattered lives will have to be pieced together, and the common spaces of economy and culture will need to be reconstructed. It may be that not all the freedoms and rights, many of them established out of years of struggle, will be restored. At the least, what will endure is the realization that a social order that had once seemed stable, predictable, and secure—if not just and equitable—is actually

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fragile and ephemeral. Many things will never be the same again.

But perhaps this is not completely bad. It is possible that a rupturing of entrenched systems and processes, a challenging of certainties that seemed beyond question, a breach in the apparently inexorable continuity of the familiar, will not only interrupt pathways and passages we know well but also reveal hitherto obstructed, or obscure and hidden, new ones. Perhaps the disruption itself can open the way to an unexpected, even welcome, destabilization of old assumptions, habits, expectations, and values.

Since the origins of modernity it is has been feared that the grey predictability of the everyday imposes a stultifying blanket over ethical life (Flaubert 2005 [1881]). Despite the belief that the endless supplies of commodities have generated an irrefragable consensus comprising all levels of society, the relentless production process with its unceasing routines has created a weary sense that life has been drained of challenge, risk, renewal, and discovery. According to this view, the more organized and codified our lives become the more limited are our moral choices (Nietzsche 1974 [1882]; Marcuse 1964).

Despite its cultural force, however, this claim has never been true. It has never been the case that ordinary life has been completely stripped of the keenness of danger and unexpected challenges. Even in the morass of suburban conformism, people have still faced death and suffering, bereavement, and loss. They have still fallen in love, made love, betrayed and experienced betrayal, fallen ill, suffered desperately, and grieved for their loved ones, who themselves may have experienced great tragic loss. They have been called upon to display courage, and sometimes heroism, and to draw meaning out of the depths of despair. Even in the midst of suburban conformity, the tawdriness of the traffic jams, and the dullness of the routines, protocols, and neoliberal imperatives, a rich, if recondite, moral life has always survived (Komesaroff 2014, 254ff.).

Heroism may have survived within everyday life, even if it has remained constrained within the strict limits of the assumed consensus. But what is striking about COVID-19 is that it is precisely this consensus that has been disrupted, along with the stable order associated with it. An epidemic is commonly thought to be primarily a medical event, on a large scale: a mass collection of symptoms—of fevers, coughs, myalgias, advancing shortness of breath—linked to heroic technical interventions, followed by recovery or death. In reality, it is also a cultural phenomenon that acts on our relationships with each other and within and between communities. It can cause mass suffering and shared grieving, and it may also provoke large-scale local, national, and global turmoil.

The complexity goes even further than this. An epidemic is an assemblage of different kinds of objects—biological, social, cultural, and political. It is encountered at multiple levels, by individuals and their communities, at the level of knowledge and deep affective experience. And it can unleash wild forces which propagate like shock waves across multiple domains, destroying old structures, posing new challenges, and potentially opening the way for new, previously uncharted, possibilities.

This is indeed the experience of the present pandemic. The sheer force of its impact has precipitated an unprecedented regime of authoritarian reaction. At the same time, however, it has also offered the hope of breaking the grip within which contemporary global society has been held. Its pure, unbounded excess of horror and death holds the promise of opening up new domains of moral experience, raising new questions and options. As in other times of exception, such as states of war, siege, or social upheaval, lines of cleavage are exposed in what had appeared to be an impregnable panoply of money and power. For a moment at least, an opportunity arises for renewed courage and imagination, moral restoration, a refreshment of the goals and purposes of ordinary life. In this way, it can provide a "breath of light emerging out of the darkness" (Blanchot 1980).

It may seem perverse to try to draw out positive outcomes from an unspeakable disaster, but new possibilities are being uncovered around the world. We have witnessed an upsurge of community action involving people for whom the concept of a social movement may formerly have been very foreign. Young people have committed themselves to prepare and deliver food to elderly, isolated, and homeless people. Groups have formed to "adopt a grandparent" (Mather 2020), and to provide physical care and support, to offer hope and reassurance, to bake bread, and to make available shelter and accommodation for those in need (Bicycle NSW 2000; Cunningham 2020; Ellis 2020). There are battles in supermarkets, but there is also generosity (Covid-19 Mutual Aid 2020; The Guardian 2020). Online parties, support groups, exercise classes—expressions of solidarity and resistance—have flourished (Butler 2020).

In many countries, healthcare workers, often viewed as well-paid functionaries of a cold and thankless system of power and privilege, have displayed devotion and personal courage, frequently risking their own lives to care for those affected, all too often at great personal cost to themselves and their families. In some places, the dullness of suburbia, rendered even more desolate by the bleakness of lockdown, has been enlivened by rooftop music and dance, sending sounds of joy mixed with defiance echoing through the streets (Agence France-Presse 2020; Langley and Coutts 2020; Kozlowska and Todd 2020). In many countries, religious communities, sometimes accused of preaching anodyne ideologies characterized by hypocrisy and *ressentiment*, have on many occasions distinguished themselves by overcoming cultural and other barriers and displaying selfless service (Anglicare 2020; Press Trust of India 2020; Food Tank 2020).

Old conflicts have been interrupted, with new possibilities of dialogue and reconciliation, in some cases previously considered unimaginable, opening up. The vicious drug trade in the favelas of Rio and elsewhere in Latin America has given way to solidarity and community protection (RioOnWatch 2020; Watson 2020; Semple and Ahmed 2020). "People's peace talks" have been attempted in Israel and Palestine (Dateline 2020).

In these ways, in many places, seemingly against all the odds, the exigencies of disaster and lockdown have generated a rediscovery of the very values thought to have been mercilessly drained from social life. A moment of transcendence, considered by many to have been irrevocably extinguished, has been reignited (Marcuse 1968). The consequences of this are yet to be elaborated. It is just possible that, in a bizarre and paradoxical way, COVID-19 will open a new space from which the thrall imposed by the globalized economy and the culture associated with it can be broken. Perhaps within this space, matters previously immune from questioning can be reopened to critical gaze. The refusal of governments to take effective action to limit climate change, long justified on the basis of supposed impossible risks to global political and economic relationships, has been exposed as unfounded. Indeed, the pandemic itself has cleared skies around the world (McMahon 2020), reduced pollution of waterways, and even returned dolphins to the canals of Venice (Pentreath 2020), raising for many questions about which parts of the old regime should be restarted once the epidemic has come under control (Latour 2020).

It has to be admitted that the opposite is also true. It is not necessary to quote the many counterexamples to the positive threads listed above. Racism, xenophobia, narrow political ambition and expediency, profiteering, and exploitation undoubtedly still flourish—indeed, in many cases, especially in the United States, supercharged by extreme right-wing reactions to the public health restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus. Governments and economies dependent on violence, cruel exploitation, and naked military power continue to flourish, in some cases drawing even greater strength from the emergency. This is not the age of social movements, and there can be no suggestion that a brief upsurge of magnanimity and solidarity, even widely publicized through the power of social media, is likely on its own to acquire political force. There is no obvious pathway whereby momentary flashes of moral renewal can be converted into a process to unpick and unravel the Gordian knot of neoliberalism and managerialism.

Maybe the most we can expect is that, proceeding from the unthinkability of despair (Adorno 1966, 385), the crisis will bring to visibility a few things previously hidden from view and allow a few forgotten questions to be posed. If in this way the epidemic can deliver even a few ecstatic moments of possibility, if it may kindle through small sparks a slow fire that sustains the idea that we can live differently, then at least some hope may be preserved of a world more attuned to the needs of the vast majority of those who inhabit it.

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