



Vacillating Individuals, Vacillating Authorities in Pandemics: Considerations and Observations, Illustrated by a Franz Kafka parable and Albert Camus' *The Plague*
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Let us start with the individual who needs a helpful and caring environment to start out in life. The strange and sudden discontinuity of birth may not be experienced consciously as frightening, but it may leave traces of a primordial and unavoidable distress. Similar situations of danger and anxiety will recur not only in childhood but also in later years and finally when the end of life seems in sight. As soon as the human being is capable of feeling a need, he learns to repeat that which helped at the start: *cry and/or look for an object to stop or feed the need*. Later, we often regard an authority as such an object. This is a person (for instance, a scientist or politician), who is expected to possess special knowledge or power, and ideally both, to solve the problem at hand.

To struggle in frightening circumstances and to search for protective agents who offer an exit from them is a familiar plight due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Stopping the pandemic is a universal aim, but individuals and authorities vacillate regarding exactly how this can be achieved. This wavering provokes additional plights and further struggles. Perhaps this dire situation is still too close and the exit still too uncertain and far away, so that we tend to avoid the feelings it provokes. *Troubles often come, but as soon as they burst into our life, it becomes difficult to fully believe in these troubles*, Camus suggests in his most renowned novel *The Plague*.

If we want to grasp the distressing experience of helplessness not only rationally but fully - which means also emotionally - we need an accompanying experience or memory allowing us the right distance, that can be summoned without mobilising all our defences to cloud everything. In this delicate task a Franz Kafka parable might help. The parable concerns a man wandering in an unknown milieu, coming upon an authority who elicits by his profession of a policeman an expectation of aid.¹ This expectation will not be fulfilled. The parable conveys in just eight lines a swift change of perception and a loss of orientation and self-confidence, spurring estrangement and anxiety, due to an uncanny change of a hopefully good object into a cold rejecting one.

Give it up!

It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted. I was on my way to the station.

As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I was not very well acquainted with the town as yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself."

¹ In German policeman = "Schutzmann" = a man who protects: protection = Schutz

“Give it up! Give it up!” said he and turned away with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.

Kafka's parable starts within an urban void of time and space. There is nothing here, no objects. The streets are clean. There is nothing disturbing in view and, at first glance, no people. The English translation of the German *“leere Straße”* suggests a vanished object: ‘deserted,’ it says. The otherwise unconcerned narrator is focused on finding the station.

Nevertheless, he already felt a twinge of concern that prodded him to check the tower clock against his watch. What is official reality – the tower clock – and his own watch (his inner feelings) are no longer in concordance, but are already drifting apart. He cannot help but surmise that he cannot trust his perceptions. If he is wrong about the time what else is awry? We do not know why he is in a hurry. Is it an obligation, demanded by an authority such as an employer? But we do know that he feels an urgent need to be somewhere else at a certain time, and he suddenly feels no longer sure whether he can manage it.

The parable is framed by indicators of loneliness: “deserted streets ... someone who wants to be alone with his laughter”. Both the anxious subject and the indifferent authority, answering with curt discouraging advice – are each monadically alone. No sympathetic human contact occurs. The quest to get useful directions from the authority fails and intensifies the individual's feelings of uncanniness, because the policemen expected to come to his aid instead mocks him and turns away. Finally, both depart the scene, the man who looked for help, and the rejecting authority.

Are we reminded of our initial reactions to Covid-19? Was it not also an unknown and looming distress? Are we not trying to find authorities, who finally will solve the problem? And is it not part of the problem that on the one hand we urgently look for authorities, on the other hand we have doubts about who among them we should trust? Since most of us have neither the knowledge nor power to arrive at a trustworthy analysis of a complex problem and to a unanimously convincing decision, some of us embrace the scientists' recommendations, some spurn them. Some will cling to chosen political authorities uncritically, both those who focus on health, and those authorities who have goals other than medical priorities, such as 'saving the economy.'

Many individuals vacillate between believing and doubting, between trust and mistrust regarding authorities. Some authorities do change their rules and recommendations with seeming frequency. Some of these altered orders seem justified, following the wayward course of the pandemic; others provoke mass protests. Individuals waver between facing this danger and denying it, authorities vacillate between focusing on sheer survival and the best way of restoring order. Most of us will acknowledge that nobody can be sure about all consequences of this pandemic and when it will end.

There is a congruence between the physician's oath of Hippocrates to act “according to my power and my capacity to decide” and the tasks of experts and political authorities.² Each individual is confronted with deciding whom to trust. A pandemic is a

² There has been a noteworthy shift from the active meaning in the original Greek “crisis” to a passive connotation in our use of the foreign word “crisis”. The original meaning contains both:

problem shared with everybody. This can cause panic, but it also can create a feeling of unity with the whole world.

When Camus' narrator, Dr. Rieux, at the onset of the epidemic, becomes sure of his plague diagnosis, he knows what to do: *one must face it in order to master it*. Rieux does not react as most of the people do. Due to the mechanism of denial, when we are confronted with frightening facts, there is a tendency to shift the problem elsewhere. But Dr. Rieux allows neither himself nor others to hide. He tells the government, that it is not important whether one calls it 'plague' or 'fever of growth'. What is important is to prevent the necessary isolations of the citizens from turning into eternal separations via killing half the population. Dr. Rieux is an authority in the best sense: he is capable of facing the facts and sticking to them. Thus, he cannot await a gathering of statistics, which might only prove what is known and sacrifice more lives needlessly.³ The political authorities would prefer to assemble more evidence before acting. They were ready to subordinate everything to data. However, even if they had their way, there is still a lot that would be missing. Sekoff explains what is essential:

Normative accounts, linear models, polar oppositions, essentialist formulations, are among the many *signposts of an anxiety* towards muchness... *Muchness* is intimately related to a dimension that I will designate as the realm of *psychical textures*. These textures emanate from our inherent capacities for emotional and ideational fullness. When our thoughts push up against the border of what is intelligible or bearable, we are in the realm of muchness. Muchness also designates the '*felt thought*', the emotional grit and substance embedded in most mentation (without this 'emotional dirt', our thoughts would be sterilized abstractions, denuded of connection with our felt experience). (Sekoff 2016, 370-372)

These "capacities for emotional and ideational fullness" belong to our inner world and activate inner resources, especially needed due to serious external threats. Versus the external world, the inner world can evoke the "*stillness of the self that is active, searching and seeing, [...] alive and kicking,*" as Kohon demonstrates in his discussion of Louise Bourgeois and Franz Kafka. Allaying our immense human desire for safety and certainty is an understandable wish, but this does not mean it can be fulfilled. "Inspiration comes from retreat ...", Bourgeois declared, signaling as well the need for a *creative privacy of the self* (Kohon 2016, 26-29). It may be that such a stillness of the self can be only reached after the pain of mourning for all our losses and separations, as Camus himself believed. He thought that only this path might have enable us to recover fully. This is a

the fact of our human capacity to influence our fate, *and our limitations*. (See also Zwettler-Otte S. 2005: From Freud's "splendid isolation" to our "crisis": EPF Bulletin 59; 2006: The body and the sense of reality. Discussion of Simon Salonen's paper: Beyond the mind-body-dualism". Ed. Evi Zacharacopoulou, Athens: Elsevier; 2009: Freud and the Media, Peter Lang: Internat. Publishing house of science; 2013: Lost steps: Avoidance versus use of the death-drive-concept. In: Zwettler-Otte S. ed. The Sphinx and the riddles of passion, love and sexuality. With contributions by Rainer Gross and Stefano Bolognini.)

³ The German word *wahrnehmen* expresses exactly that it is a) about acknowledge, what we recognize as being *wahr* (real, not fictional), and b)to accept *and keep* this knowledge: *nehmen*= to take it (in) and not lose and forget it again.

hard, but fruitful way but one which might turn out much more helpful in the long run than all the defences based on fear, denial and infantile regression. There are so many hidden ways we try to get rid of unpleasant realities:

waiting for evidence

hoping in passivity that the problem will solve itself

hopeless giving in - showing a kind of agreement with the catastrophe, which is experienced like a bad object, and identifying with this object in order to survive ('identification with the aggressor')

acting destructively in order to escape the role of a victim⁴

get accustomed to it; looking for distraction etc.

The problem is that we usually are not aware of these defences which guarantee only a short-term relief, if that. Add to these mechanisms the routinisation of social organizations which are geared for business as usual in the midst of any catastrophe. Rieux in Camus's tale overcame such seductions, recognising their risks and drawbacks. He takes into consideration *external reality* as well as *internal reality* and allows each their place when he reckons what to do. There is within individuals – even or especially authorities - a tension between recognizing and rejecting unwanted evidence. The result of this unconscious struggle is a strong tension between poles, looking both for orientation and an exit at the same time. Rieux, fortunately, has an ego strong enough to mediate between facts and feelings, at least most or enough of the time. Vacillating between contradictory poles is for him a step in a process of elaboration, leading to a helpful decision in his case, or sometimes only to the recognition of "an irreducible gap between the positions themselves" (Kohon 2016, 88)

In *The Plague* not all fellow citizens agree. Dr. Rieux is reproached by some for making decisions 'in abstraction', without any emotion. To some degree he accepts this criticism, feeling he no longer has to fight as there develops spontaneously an inner reaction that *slowly closes the heart if there is too much pain*. But he keeps in mind that sometimes abstraction is stronger than intuition, and that then one has to make allowance for abstraction.

Rieux is acutely aware he has to pay attention to the facts of external reality and to the inner reality of feelings which together influence actions, individually and collectively. The prelude to a correct decision often is a judicious wavering between opposed poles, testing them, without moving precipitously to a decision, evaluating 'according to one's power and capacity to decide' the sound course in this special situation at this special moment. To do so one must resist the temptation to snuggle into fear, habit or blind confidence.

Despite Rieux's insightfulness, he is not immune to the unconscious. He feels he has failed in his private life by not acting according to his own advice that nothing in this world is worth turning away from what one loves. Against his better judgment he had let

⁴ For instance, when some people burned their house down to destroy and to be rather the offender, not the victim, thus fostering some illusion of omnipotence.

his wife go to a recovery site. She dies and he never sees her again. Camus never lets us forget that even the best of authorities are also individuals with flaws and foibles. Nobody can be sure they will survive the catastrophe unscathed. Every individual is always a member of the whole human group even if their reactions may be diverse.

Conclusions

- We discussed the *polarity of facing the facts or denying them* and noted mostly unconscious tricks to get rid of what we should accept as external reality.
- There exists not only *an external reality but a real inner world*, and this is latter aspect often decisive for appraising authorities, who are experienced either as good objects and representatives of helpful order, or as enemies due to unwelcome impositions.
- D. W. Winnicott (1986, 172-182) *advised us to focus on evidence-based knowledge*. "In human affairs, however, thinking is but a snare and a delusion unless the unconscious is taken into account." He observes: "that the public generally must not be expected to be interested in unconscious motivation." (1986, 173). Thus we witness defences at play from the start, when unpleasant or frightening facts appear.
- J. Sekoff (2016) shows that focusing *only* on evidence and effectiveness is motivated by (often unconscious) *anxiety*. There is a crossroads where one tries to escape facts via defences or else can face them in order to master them. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud confirms that people are inclined to denial, but he doubts "whether they must be like this, whether their innermost nature necessitates it". And he judges: "We believe that it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life." (Freud 1928, 47; 55)

It is natural that we first shy away from frightening facts, but trying to avoid fear and pain seems a second best solution. As mature human beings we anticipate consequences so as to master difficult situations by adapting to them thoughtfully. To do so it is necessary to acknowledge external reality, and our subjective reactions to it, which require our control so that these subjective reactions do not distort what we can see and what serves as the basis for our decisions. Thus evidence-based data is necessary, but to focus only on abstracted data blurs our awareness on what might now be the best course of action.

One can cope with the uncertainty catastrophe brings either by (1) insisting on absolute certainty, which does not exist. There is a grave risk in this sober endeavour of turning up desired results and of capitulating to defences that turn a blind eye to danger. Gaps in evidence can delude one into thinking they aren't any (because they are not amenable to the chosen investigative methods). Or (2) we can look for ways to find the gaps and whether within them are potential spaces for better means for mastering the problem. Our inner world is not only full of fears, wishes and needs but also of resources to be tapped. Gaps in evidence can form openings to better understandings of our plights (Phillips 1988, 1).

Darkness belongs to life. "Darkness works like the negative of a photograph: the negative makes the conditions for the picture to appear". The acceptance that our idea of safety "is illusory in real life; [...] and "cannot be achieved without genuine psychic pain and arduous working through" (Kohon 2016, 19; 44). This wisdom is valid not only for the psychotherapeutic task but often enough in normal private life.

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