

Notes on ethical dilemmas in the coronavirus pandemic

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ABSTRACT

By a systematic-critical literature review, prioritizing the dialectic method of exposing both sides of the problem, trying for a possible synthesis, we will analyze some publications that portray the theme of the pandemic that the world is facing in this second decade of the twentieth century, seeking, first, to present an overview of some of the great health catastrophes that have marked human history. Then, we will try to present epidemiological characteristics of the COVID-19 virus, and, finally, we will critically discuss how the Brazilian civil society and the political-institutional elites are facing this catastrophe, bringing to light some of the main ethical-moral dilemmas that extend over a theoretical-philosophical reflection on the future of our time

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; ethics; society.

RESUMO

Notas sobre dilemas éticos na pandemia de coronavírus

Por meio de uma revisão de literatura sistemático-crítica, priorizando o método dialético de expor os dois lados do problema, tentando uma possível síntese, far-se-á uma análise de algumas publicações que retratam o tema da pandemia que o mundo enfrenta nesta segunda década do século XX, buscando-se, primeiramente, apresentar um panorama de algumas das grandes catástrofes sanitárias que marcaram a história da humanidade. Depois, apresentam-se características epidemiológicas do vírus COVID-19 e, por fim, disserta-se, criticamente, sobre a forma como a sociedade civil brasileira e as elites político-institucionais estão enfrentando esta catástrofe, trazendo à luz alguns dos principais dilemas ético-morais que se estendem sobre uma reflexão teórico-filosófica sobre o futuro de nosso tempo.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; pandemia; ética; sociedade.

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Introduction

The year 2020 will be marked in the history of humanity forever, because generations have not known a disease that caused such a transformation in the way of life of populations on a global scale. It can be said that given the effects and transformations caused by the gigantic impacts of the disease, we are living in a new civilization or in a new time frame. Faced with the worsening situation, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new coronavirus a pandemic on March 11, 2020.¹ According to them, a pandemic implies the spread on a global scale of a new contagious disease; in this way, the concept is used when an epidemic, an outbreak that affects a certain region, spreads across different continents and regions of the globe and is transmitted from person to person.²

At the beginning of the 20th century, humanity was already faced with some catastrophic situations that threatened the health of several populations, however none with the magnitude of what is experienced now, Schueler declares:

Before Covid-19, the most recent pandemic had been in 2009, with the so-called swine flu, caused by the H1N1 virus. The virus is believed to have originated in pigs and birds and then passed to humans. The first case was registered in Mexico. The WHO upgraded the disease to a pandemic status in June of that year, after counting 36,000 cases in 75 countries. In total, 187 countries have reported cases and nearly 300,000 people have died. The end of the pandemic was decreed by the WHO in August 2010.

These pandemic situations are aggravated because countries are not prepared to face the necessary demands to protect their populations, even more endangering the citizens of countries of emerging economies. Aware that this article is still being presented amid the unfolding tragedy of the pandemic and that other socio-political-economic variables can influence the current and future history of nations, the objective is, with the necessary and fair prudence - cum grano salis - not to make a definitive and ready judgment about the current health situation lived, experienced and suffered by Brazil and the countries that were most impacted by the disease, sometimes fatal and that leaves indelible sequelae to those affected, both physically and psychologically. Sequelae, perhaps, that not even time will heal. It is only intended to shed some theoretical light on some points that can help in reflection and discernment, so that we can all understand the current moment. It is believed that to overcome this situation stronger, more conscious and articulated; in order to better face other health challenges that human history has placed before us, we must know and be aware of the causes that brought us here.

COVID-19 adds to an extensive list of diseases. It is known that the health calamities that befell peoples and civilizations during the entire historical process are not new. Several examples can be exemplified, among them: the typhoid fever that decimated a quarter of the Athenian soldiers and a large part of the urban population during the Peloponnesian War. This fatal disease weakened Athens' hegemony, but the sheer virulence of the disease prevented its spread to other regions and parts of Asia Minor. The disease wiped out its hosts at a rate faster than the speed of transmission. For millennia much has been conjectured, hypothetically, about the causes of this devastating plague in Ancient Greece, with many suppositions fueling various theories. However, in 2006, after much research, scientists at the University of Athens painstakingly analyzed materials recovered from burial graves found beneath the ancient city and discovered the presence of typhoid-causing bacteria, thus rewriting more reliably part of ancient history².

Furthermore, according to Schueler's research, it can be said, making a brief historical retrospective of other remarkable moments, that:

in the Antonine Plague (165-180) – perhaps caused by smallpox brought near the East; killed a quarter of the infected. Five million in total. The Plague of Cyprian (250-271) - possibly from smallpox or measles, started in the eastern provinces and spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. According to reports, at its peak it killed 5,000 people a day in Rome. Already the so-called Black Death (1300) - eight hundred years after the last appearance, the bubonic plague had returned to Europe [...] beginning to spread in Asia, the disease reached Mediterranean and Western Europe in 1348 (possibly from merchants fleeing from Italians fighting in Crimea), and killed twenty million Europeans in six years, a quarter of the total population and up to half in the worst-affected urban areas. In the previous century, the Spanish Flu (1918-1920) was an influenza virus pandemic that, between January 1918 and December 1920, infected 500 million people, about a quarter of the world population at the time. The death toll is mostly estimated to be between 17 million and 50 million, with some projections putting as high as 100 million. Regardless of the difference between the numbers, it is one of the deadliest epidemics in human history.²

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the Sars-CoV-2 virus, originated in late 2019, supposedly in China, and quickly spread to other countries. Nowadays, given the universe of fierce wars of political narratives that permeate our time, there is a lot of speculation about the real and true cause of the emergence of the pandemic. It is not here to analyze them; but theories for all tastes and satiety can be found from various angles of the contemporary political spectrum. There is debate, among other things, whether the spread of the pandemic is correlated with a political project of economic control of world markets; or a new form of bioterrorism to change the world order. But what is certain is that the pandemic intensified, firstly, in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, where the number of infected people and fatal victims formed a dramatic scenario³. In 2021, Brazil was also the epicenter of the pandemic. .

It is known that, scientifically, Sars-CoV-2 is the viral agent that causes what has been called "coronavirus disease 2019", popularly known as COVID-19. A biological analysis of its genetic material reveals that it is basically made up of 30,000 genes organized in enveloped RNA. The coronavirus family is known for causing diseases of abundantly varied severity and well documented in the medical literature.⁴ We cannot forget that the first epidemic caused by this type of virus - severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) - gained prominence in the news and in the international media in 2003, in Asia, causing great astonishment and terror in populations that saw themselves strongly threatened by a new disease, whose cure and immunization were unknown. In 2012, the world was once again terrorized by another coronavirus, which made Saudi Arabia make headlines around the world and enter the priority health care agenda of agencies and international organizations, with the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). In addition to these three variants, four others can be mentioned - HKU1, NL63, OC43 and 229E -, known worldwide for causing low-severity diseases in humans.^{5, 6, 7}

It is important to record what has been disclosed and publicized all over the world: the first officially recorded case of Sars-CoV-2 infection took place in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, where a patient, a regular from the live animal market for slaughter in the city, presented a clinical picture of severe acute pneumonia hitherto unknown.⁴ Some animals that are not palatable to Western food tastes - such as the bat (*Rhinolophus affinis*) and the Malayan pangolin (*Manis javanica*) - can be considered the possible original vectors of transmission to humans, given the genomic proximity of the coronaviruses found in these species and the virus that causes covid-19.^{5, 8}

Scientific studies emphasize broad genome similarity of all mapped lineages in the world, suggesting that a single animal-human contagion was the genesis of the pandemic.^{5, 8, 9} Since the beginning of dissemination, issues involving biosecurity, bioterrorism and bioprotection, including governance, have assumed unparalleled importance in international geopolitics and in the agendas of interest of countries. It seems that we are reliving the hardest and most nebulous times of the Cold War, or perhaps the Second World War. Although Sars-CoV-2 has been classified as risk grade 2 by the specialized health authorities, its high transmissibility and virulence attest to the need to adopt higher biosafety levels than those currently in vogue, that is, those that humanity was prepared for and adapted to. Especially for health professionals, among whom the number of infections and deaths has been quite expressive.^{10, 11} Patients in a serious clinical condition have received medications to alleviate symptoms, in addition to sedation, coma induction and, when necessary, mechanical respiratory support, in the expectation that the immune system will respond and be able to quell the viral process.^{12, 13}

Impacts of the pandemic on our time

Sanitary crises are not new in the history of humanity - as seen above -, despite being rare and, sometimes, centuries pass without any being recorded. But it's not just pandemics that terrorize populations in quadrants around the world with pain and suffering. It is known that, when the World Health Organization (WHO) decreed the coronavirus pandemic, the world was already facing serious and challenging humanitarian issues, social calamities and environmental catastrophes. However, none of them is new in the history of humanity¹⁴. Our time is particularly marked by other apocalyptic catastrophes that, generally, do not gain the media dimension necessary to alert and sensitize populations about the large-scale suffering and deaths that affect

thousands of people every day. There are many wars and bellicose conflicts that are impoverishing thousands of people in Third World countries, taking the lives of countless people, in addition to generating a trail of misery, with a significant increase in the hungry and homeless.

The growing phenomenon of immigration of citizens from Africa and Haiti to Brazil and Europe is just one more symptom of this sociopolitical hecatomb of our time, which opens up an even greater crisis: the failure of our economic system to absorb with dignity, employment and income people. Social exclusion is one of the biggest wounds of our days, and it bleeds thousands of innocent lives, taking away the opportunity for a better existence. Aside from the resurgence of racist and xenophobic discourses - such as neo-Nazis -, driven by social networks, which weaken the civilizing achievements made after the French Revolution. In addition, the internal political crises in the countries, combined with the terrible local conditions of health services and the lack of an adequate social protection network in advance to receive immigrants, make this scenario challenging. Data from 2019, according to the UN agency (United Nations) for refugees, show that there are 68.5 million refugees; of which, unfortunately, 52% are children and adolescents.¹⁴

According to Ferreira, in addition to this,

the resurgence of diseases considered eradicated in many countries, such as measles and polio, and the decline in vaccination coverage. The origin is not only in the "anti-vaccination movement", which threatens the world with its ignorance and irresponsibility, but in several other factors, such as relaxation due to the temporary absence of the disease, the lack of adequate investment in public health and the political will to solve the problem as well as misguided management models and corruption. Unemployment, which in Brazil reached 11.8 million citizens in 2019, is a matter of concern and threat for many countries, developed or not. The speed of technological progress, misunderstandings in the evolution of food and consumer goods production and in the distribution of income and priority attention to the unemployed and their families, make it practically impossible to solve this serious obstacle to human development today. The assistance to the unemployed and underprivileged does not have a defined strategy, much less effective, with insufficient resources and attention, with visible incompetence, neglect and irresponsibility. [...] Health and life followed their course, in perennial risk due to negligence with the environment, a crime committed by governments, but also by society, which insists on ignoring or not believing in global warming and the imminent end of life on the planet.¹⁴

Given the historical neglect of governments with the essential public service for the population, it can be safely said that our country was not sufficiently equipped to face a health catastrophe with such lethal characteristics and with high contagion power among the population. According to Ferreira, "Brazil was not prepared for the daily life of the population without an environmental disaster or pandemic, much less for the present day imposed on us by the new coronavirus".

In these times of calamity, medicine and ethics are forced to review their paths and improve their concepts; for we never needed them more than we do now. In turn, since the emergence of bioethical reflection, in the 20th century, perhaps this is the moment when the discussion about themes about life has reached its apex. Thus, there is an urgent need for a theoretical-practical bridge between the humanities and the new technology, since the pandemic is permeated by ethical-moral dilemmas, and only a mature and serious reflection will be able to help bring new lights to lighten these dark times at all senses.

As Porto states, in chapter two of the book *Bioética e Covid-19*, the best measure in the face of a global outbreak of such a contagious and serious disease, that is, the best possible intervention, would be the effective and active search for the identification of cases. and the rapid adoption of prophylactic measures to prevent the spread and treat infected people. For this, it is necessary to guarantee testing, isolate cases and ensure appropriate hospital beds for treatment. These would be smart measures and enshrined in the medical literature to contain the pandemic. It appears that these measures can guarantee social and economic health and meet the utilitarian precept.¹⁵

The lack of trained human resources to carry out tests and follow up on patients also penalizes nations that do not massively invest in quality education for all, and that neglect effective health care, restricting access to basic public services for privileged groups. As a result, they do not even have the necessary quality of trained professionals to minimally face the pandemic. Added to this: there is the fact that the understanding of the population about the gravity of the facts is not up to the required.¹⁵

From this, it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic, with its thousands of dead, sick and sequelae; and with its socioeconomic losses, it would already be the greatest tragedy our generation faces. It can only be compared to the Second World War. However, it brings out the dilemmas arising from the great social inequality, and potentiates the consequences of the lack of education in large groups of the population. Our society, not today, let the truth be told, is experiencing a true social apartheid, with a socio-economic disruption that impacts all the indices and statistical indicators that can be analyzed. There is a lack of basic sanitation for millions of people to a lack of basic food that sickens significant portions of the population.

It is known that of the great nations in the world in terms of natural and industrial wealth, Brazil is the country that has the greatest economic disparity among its citizens. Many Brazilians do not enjoy the achievements of the rule of law and are on the margins of full citizenship, that is, lacking education, health, income and retirement. Despite being a young democracy – with periodic elections and a tripartite power – enormous social ills are a daily reality: queues at health centers, many homeless people, children far from schools or in vulnerable conditions, in addition, the low income of the employed class, who have a monthly income that is far short of meeting their basic needs, in order to have a full and dignified life. According to the 2018 report of the United Nations Development Program, the Human Development Index (HDI) places our country in the 79th position of a total of 188 countries on the globe.¹⁶ A dishonorable position, a painful situation that portrays a sad and harsh reality that can be seen, easily, on the corners and traffic lights of our cities or in the most remote corners of the center of Brazil.

According to Porto, in the face of difficulties, to adopt appropriate interventions to contain the pandemic, which encompass long-term policies in the administrative, economic, fiscal, educational and health dimensions; the last effort remains for containment: social isolation. If this ends up being the only way out, especially for those who live in places where the mortal threat is an everyday reality, it is not always feasible. Thus, the real problem arises: how to impose on people the obligation to stay at home, when hunger and misery impose the search for immediate survival? In addition, for those who live in poverty, food deprivation is added to living in an uncomfortable space and the precariousness of the working situation.¹⁵

According to Érico Andrade, the experience of time is not uniform in the pandemic:

for unemployed people, the experience of time is always immediate. That is why there is a resistance on the part of the population to simply stop all their activities. While the middle class can organize their time by dividing it according to the routine that the pandemic imposes on them, most of the working class deals with time in a deeply apprehensive way about the imminence of a layoff or in a strongly resigned way in the face of a contamination from which it can hardly escape.¹⁷

It is known that society is not just the arithmetical sum of the number of individuals, but something much greater. Thus, the enormous inequalities in the living conditions of the different population strata inevitably lead to the questioning of the real existence of collectivity. Even though we all recognize ourselves as Brazilians, can we say that we live in the same Brazil? As if the cultural differences of this continental country were not enough, which amalgams peoples of different origins, we still have social discrepancies so accentuated that perhaps – in fact – we are only sharing space, without constituting a collectivity that can point out what would be the common good.¹⁶ A difference in the way of seeing, feeling and valuing the world in different social strata is accentuated as inequalities increase.

The more unequal people's living conditions, the further their worlds are, even when they inhabit the same urban spaces¹⁵, both from a social and economic point of view, based on strong economic asymmetry and abyssal social inequality, that is, in the presence of privileges for a privileged minority and in the lack of effective policies to protect human life in all its dimensions. So, when we realize that we are just occupying the same space within a city and using the same Portuguese language, but very far from a group of people who seek a common goal - as a nation - that is the collective well-being of all, we can admit, with certainty, that we are very far from being a society, a nation that aims at greater goals¹⁵.

The crisis is worsening as health authorities and political representatives are unable to articulate themselves to respond to the height of the pandemic. There is a great mismatch in public policies to alleviate the harm arising from a social protection system that is not protecting the population.

When personal interests are being put first to the detriment of republican care structures, one cannot expect effective results of improvement in the quality of life or even a victory over the current disease that baffles our country. Many of the difficulties arising from the pandemic arise from a lack of social sensitivity, whether on the part of public authorities or even ordinary people who do not follow the minimum medical recommendations for prevention. The worsening of the pandemic is a sign that the Brazilian social fabric is not so connected; because it seems that society is formed by a set of islands that do not connect and do not interact, that is, in which each group thinks only of its particular interests and of meeting its needs based on the sacrifice of the most vulnerable.

To make the situation worse - on the other hand -, pseudo-intellectuals intoxicated with false and sophisticated knowledge contribute with disconnected theories of all kinds that mitigate the reflexive capacity of pointing out real paths, to solve the country's difficulties. Few were those who admitted, despite having academic degrees and dedicated to study, that we are at a unique moment in human history and that there are no simple and quick solutions to such complex problems. The pandemic has shown that we are immersed in a narcissistic and extremely individualistic culture and has laid bare our apparent certainties. People, in general, are not concerned with the collective health and well-being, but only with their self; individuality was indeed exacerbated. It can be seen that there is a lack of care for the health of the other, an almost total lack of responsibility for otherness; which is the most valuable thing in human life. By neglecting to wear a mask, you are endangering the other, and, even more, potentially putting your own life in danger, and this does not seem to cause the slightest remorse, embarrassment or moral feeling in many people who make immorality their own *modus vivendi*. To exemplify this terrifying situation: the wealthiest social groups in society, supposedly the most intellectualized, seek to buy vaccines and immunize themselves without going through the republican and isonomic procedures that public health agencies provide. The irresponsibility, whether of the economic or political elite, or of less wealthy people who organize parties and agglomerations, faithfully mirror a hedonistic culture that transforms the self and the pursuit of pleasure or excessive well-being into an ethical-moral imperative, subverting any reasonable range of values.

Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 was quite profound and spread to all countries, however, as always, the social classes that are most affected reside in the social stratum with the lowest income and accessibility to consumer goods. In this way, medicine and the sciences of care have to reinvent themselves to cope with the enormous demand and work overload, with resources that are sometimes scarce and precarious. It is necessary to recognize that the Herculean efforts of the professionals who are on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic were a stimulus for other people to also be sensitized, to aim for and provide a better quality of life for all. Rethinking people's way of life in the light of ethics and bioethics that incorporate humanistic principles seems to be one of the great characteristics of these hellish days that saw many people cry and/or bury their loved ones.

Through this article, without intending to exhaust the subject, it was humbly learned, once again, that epidemics have always been present at certain moments in the history of human civilization, negatively impacting the life expectancy of the population and leaving an immense trail of pain, an avalanche of misery and apocalyptic suffering. However, unlike previous pandemics, COVID-19 happens at a singular and rare moment, of many scientific and technological advances; thanks to the internet, human society is all connected and we all form a global village. Literally, what happens in China impacts us directly. If this has a good and positive side, as it helps to advance science and accelerate discoveries in medicine and, in addition, to socialize medical knowledge; on the other hand, unfortunately, it represents an opportunity for certain economic-political groups to disseminate fake news, hateful speeches and distorted messages about the disease, generating unnecessary alarms, or even encouraging denialist attitudes in relation to preventive practices enshrined in the international scientific literature.

It is necessary to be attentive so that public and state policies to combat the pandemic are articulated with civil society in a cohesive, organic way, and with the best and most current epidemiological strategies. The answers to the confrontations that arise with the increase of the coronavirus,

in society, are not simple or subject to limited analysis; as they affect the whole fabric and structure of society. For this, first of all, every citizen, whether in the health area or not, must be well-informed about the disease; because the first war to be won in the fight against the pandemic is against distorted and denialist information.

The ethical dilemma between the preservation of life and economic growth is a reality that is very present in the media debates and in the lives of common people, it has its own reason for being and cannot be mitigated. However, in order to make responsible and correct judgments, one must assume a position of empathy with the people who suffer: either those who are victims of the disease, or those whose economic activity and income are impaired. We live in society to seek common solutions for the collective good and to overcome the civilizational challenges that arise. Thus, public authorities must take care, as much as possible, for people's health, through medical-sanitary measures, as well as through subsidies and economic stimuli, such as tax reductions - within the limits of what the state treasury includes -, to implement and encourage proactive work and income dynamics. Less political use of the pandemic, regardless of political biases, or sensationalist media directions, is an extremely important part for society to minimize the catastrophic effects of the pandemic and point out hopes for a better future for all.

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