



Human Condition and the Possible Benefits of a Pandemy

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Short Communication

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Six years ago, in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis alerted us by denouncing the frenetic rhythm of our lives. He used the term “rapidación” to criticize the celerity imposed to human actions, a condition he contrasted with the natural slowness of biological evolution. In his appeal to an inevitable change, he invited us to lead a more serene life, where we would consider Nature as a friend. This change would make us adopt a more frugal attitude to face the environment and to enjoy a simple life, with its small daily pleasures. The pandemic threat we are now facing is usually classified as a calamity, as something we fear and should fight, using all the means available to extirpate it. Yet it can be faced as an opportunity of changing our usual life-style, namely in what concerns the increasingly rhythm to which we have grown accustomed to. The compulsory confinement at home, where we are forced to stay within walls, with scarce physical contacts with other people, has affected us in a negative way, stressing the vulnerability of our human condition [1].

The concept of “human condition” as something different from “human nature”, was a relevant topic in Hannah Arendt’s philosophy. When writing *The Human Condition* she claimed that although it is possible to speak about the nature of things, nothing could persuade us that there is a human nature. The reason of this impossibility is that the human being is a person, a who, and things are a what: “ (...) nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things (...) the conditions of human existence-life itself, natality and mortality, wordliness, plurality and the earth - can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they condition us absolutely.” To Arendt, only God could accept the existence of a human nature, because God created men and, consequently, could have a global vision of them, understanding all their specificities. But no human being would be able to define his own nature. That would

be the same as jumping over his own shadow, a fact which is intrinsically impossible.

Many philosophers tried to examine carefully this problem but no one was ever able to solve it in a satisfactory way. Arendt reminds us that Saint Augustine, a philosopher she studied when preparing her PHD, could never solve this mystery in his *Confessions*. This difficulty led her to use the more realistic term of “human condition.” Human condition is grounded in the world and consists of a complex whole of activities and capacities that radically change the “modus vivendi” of mankind. The constitutive activities of human condition are not identifiable with the main characteristics of humanity and humanity may continue when they disappear [2]. It is possible that men do not share the conditions we think to be essential to human life, but humanity may prevail in them. When we speak of human condition we mean a complex whole of activities and capacities that radically change when deep alterations occur in people’s lives. To explain this situation Arendt gives us the example of a possible flight to another planet resulting from an hypothetical earthly catastrophe. In this state of affairs, such people would not share a human condition but they would maintain their humanity and keep their human nature safe. The definitive activities of human condition are not identifiable with the essential features of humanity. Humanity can be maintained when human activities no longer exist. The hypothetical situation of emigrants in another planet where it would be possible to work and act would not provoke the end of the fugitives’ humanity, they still would be compelled to live in certain conditions. We can accept the existence of human beings that do not share the conditions we consider to be essential to human life and yet they can keep their humanity.

Arendt elected three activities that essentially typify human condition and that guarantee the determinant aspects of our humanity. They are labour, work and action. Labour is the original expression of human condition because it

concerns the body and guarantees life. The English word labour is used when we speak of our bodily functions. By means of our labour we are integrated in the cycle of life, we grow old, we overcome certain diseases, etc. We all have a biological life but this life does not distinguish us from one another. On the contrary, labour brings us together. The animal laborans has no place in public space, he is limited to the family and to the private domain but each man has a biography, his own life that goes beyond his private space. By means of work we persevere as a species which shapes a new world as long as we establish relationships with other men by means of our production, of our techné. Labour is lived but work is produced, it is something we make, creating goods and non-natural products. Homo faber is different from homo laborans. This one is a manufacturer. As long as he manufactures things he creates stability, continuity and concretion:

The animal laborans, which with its body and the help of tame animals nourishes life, may be the lord and master of all living creatures, but he still remains the servant of nature and the earth; only homo faber conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth." The Human Condition Action is a higher stage of human activities. It opens the gates that lead to history, and consequently, to immortality. Action calls for a new relation among human beings. By it the human world is transformed and becomes a place where we can live. Action does not need the intervention and mediation of objects but requires a plurality of relationships because it is by action that we state our differences. We all share things but each of us has his own identity, which allows us to begin something new, unpredictable and unexpected. Action is the essential core of human condition, tracing the borders of humanity and withdrawing us from slavery and animal life. Action reveals itself in politics, in intercourse and in plurality. Although Arendt sometimes sees politics as a stage where truth has lost its status by mingling with opinion, she also faces politics as a noble activity, where we share our common action and speak with one another. Life in a human society requires action, as well as it requires speech [3].

Contemplation and theory so highly valued in ancient and medieval times, allow us to experience eternity. Yet, Modern Age disturbed the established hierarchy between active and contemplative life and placed the human condition in *vita activa*. Contemplation as the guardian of truth lost its place among the scholars who gave primacy to "how" and forgot "why", replacing "being" by "making." In this reversal, utility took the place of truth and production regulated happiness which began to be measured by the amount of pleasure offered by what we produce. Today, human condition represents the wicked consequences of the promises made in the seventeenth century. Human action is materialized by scientists who act in the world from the standpoint of the

universe, giving no attention to human connections. Common people gave up their power and placed it in the hands of a few, abdicating from their most precious privilege - thinking, deliberating, and dialoguing with themselves and with others. The condition in which we live does not explain what we are but it shows us how we live. When speaking of human condition we mean not only what was given to us but also what we built. Men are conditioned but they are also able to create, to produce things and events. Men are constantly creating their own conditions and these are as strong as the natural ones. The most we can say about human nature is that it is conditioned, that it obeys to conditions.

In the pandemic situation we presently live, experience is deeply altered. The connections we used to establish with other people no longer need their real presence. A face to face dialogue is replaced by computers, mobile phones and social networks. Seeing and hearing are the predominant senses; touch is put aside and considered as something dangerous. Our home is now the place where we work and the boundaries of this common space are frequently established by means of real fights among parents, children and siblings, compelled to live together inside the same walls. Contacts with strangers are threatened by possible infections; kisses and hugs are strongly discouraged; greetings were altered and the usual handshake was replaced by soft punches that although friendly given are somewhat aggressive, inviting to seclusion. Parties and family gatherings impose a limited number of participants and an indoor assembly of many people is considered almost viewed as a crime. In cultural and religious events we are obliged to consider a "numerus clausus"; assemblies are forbidden because of the danger of bacterial dissemination. Television is the means by which we are in touch with the world, namely the cultural world, as cinemas, concerts and theatres have been abandoned as dangerous places. Mobile phones became the indispensable tools that link us with one another but elder people are unable to use all the resources they offer and this situation exacerbates the generation gap.

These and other negative consequences provoked by the present pandemic wave make us understand how human condition has been deeply altered. Nostalgically, we remember the days when we could walk in the streets without wearing a mask, when there was no problem of inviting our friends, when we could use swimming pools and gymnasiums with no fear of being contaminated, and when the week-ends were seen as a possibility of changing the work routine. But can we classify the human condition we presently live as thoroughly negative? And must we forget it as soon as the danger decreases and our normal life is retaken? Do we expect to go back in time and intend to recover our way of living in 2020, with no alterations? Can we acknowledge some useful aspects of the current

catastrophe?. One positive consequence of the situation we are living is the opportunity given to fight acceleration, a circumstance that had invaded our daily lives. Because of the pandemic menace we have been negatively affected by an imposed fixity in the same space and by the restrictions of contacts and activities.

Yet, this state of affairs has also been an opportunity to enjoy lost moments, to open different doors and to discover new friends and interests. The time that we are compelled to spend indoors, especially for those who do not have fixed schedules, may become an opportunity for enjoyment and discovery. During our imposed confinement speed loses its purpose-why should we try to be quick if we are the sole responsible rulers of our mornings, afternoons and evenings? The pandemic era made us the main rulers of space and time, challenging our creativity. In a Kantian perspective we used to consider them as “*priori forms of our sensibility*”, determining our connection to the world of things. But in our present state, time and space became our own creations as we are responsible for the invention of new schedules and new spaces. Actually there is a sort of discovery of the multiple possibilities offered by familiar places we knew, we are constantly creating new rhythms, altering our resting hours and being masters of nights and days. The usual complaint that time is short is replaced by the challenge to find a way to fulfil our gaps. And the deceleration that we felt as something negative, imposed as inevitability, can now be understood as a value that we must learn to appreciate.

We should face our daily anguished doubts as possible stimuli by which we can accede to new interests. It is important to disregard the stress that usually commanded our lives. Let us enjoy the opportunity we presently have of meditation and writing, let us find pleasure in the company of friends that we can contact without obeying to fixed schedules. It is time to visit old acquaintances and to recall ancient memories. We must rediscover the hidden corners of our homes replace the pots in the balconies, plant flowers and speak to them following the example of Saint-Exupéry's *Petit Prince*. Thinking in musical terms, let us change the slow measure of *andante* and bring a new cadence to our lives. Let us replace speed by intensity. Being slow is not an imperfection, on the contrary, it is something that was imposed in the relationships we established with one another. The time we are living is an opportunity to promote the most noble feelings, such as friendship and love.

This pandemic wave condemned us to a forced apartheid, altering our social life, modifying connections with friends, forbidding amusements, confining us in a domestic space and imposing routines. If, two years ago I had been told that I would not drive my car, that I was not allowed to travel, that during several months I would not go to a cinema, a theatre

or a concert, that I could not greet my friends with a kiss or a hug, that I could not go out without wearing a mask and that crowds were dangerous, I should have felt the unhappiest person in the world, deprived of all that constituted the normal rhythm of an active life. Yet, life continues, we keep our interests and the wish to be happy is still alive although oriented into new directions.

We must discover the positive consequences of the forced slowdown in which we are now compelled to live. Following the German sociologist Rosa H [4], let us relearn the art of listening and of establishing new connections with Nature, as well as with other people and with oneself. The pace of modern life is speeding up and its quality is measured in terms of resources. Nowadays, because of the increasing acceleration of our lives, we have established distorted connections with the world we inhabit. Our time compels us to an incessant growth, we are incited by a constant acceleration and this permanent stress makes us unhappy. Yet, Hartmut Rosa states that we can change this attitude and presents us the need of a *de-growth society*. Nowadays we feel guilty if we are not constantly improving [5]. To overcome the present situation we must find a *modus vivendi* where systematic growth is not viewed as an ideal to be attained by most of us. Rosa H [4] criticizes this state of affairs and incites us to fight mechanisms of acceleration, stating that speed alienates human life and destroys a meaningful connection between past, present and future.

We permanently want to grow and to innovate; every day we are compelled to run faster and faster, feeling that our time is always scarce. We approach the world in an aggressive mood, and are guilty when not capable of performing a certain number of actions. The consequences of this way of living is depression and burn out. The resonance conception sustained by Rosa H [4] is marked by slowing down and avoiding aggression [6]. Resonance implies affection and connectedness with other people and with the world. A resonant way of living is not difficult-we are resonant beings and the current speeding up of society inflicts violence upon us. The resonance he proposes as a cure to the constant acceleration we live in, has several dimensions-a diagonal one that links us with the world of things, an horizontal one that unites us with other beings and a vertical one that opens us to the aesthetical and religious experience. The imperative acceleration that gained importance in occidental societies provoked multiple crises. In order to be happy we must stop and fight for a new politics of resonance. The forced inactivity caused by the pandemic state we are experiencing has a positive side, promoting a generalized fight against the acceleration that has gained a central place in our lives, and teaching the difficult art of slowing down. But our life may be interpreted in a different way, helping us to value positive aspects, to avoid complaints, to surpass

discouragement and to try to make the best of it. Let us pay attention to the premonitory admonition made some years ago by Pope Francis, in the beginning of *Laudato Si'*-the urge to replace the speed that has ruled our lives by a slow way of connecting the world, the only attitude capable of promoting a deep encounter with people and with Nature, our Friend and Mother.

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