

"It's Just a Flu" - What We Can Learn from Our Mistakes

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We can learn a number of things from what's been happening these past few weeks. I would like to try to articulate them starting from two sentences that we have all heard many times in recent days, when the course of the epidemic seemed more uncertain: "it's just a flu", on the one hand, and its opposite "it's more serious than a simple flu", on the other. The meaning of knowledge, common sense, and decision-making has been measured around these two opposite ways of interpreting Covid-19. These are all issues that concern, in different ways, common sense, science, philosophy and politics.

It may be a professional bias, but every time I heard these phrases I was reminded of a famous aphorism by Friedrich Nietzsche: "there are no facts, only interpretations". Nietzsche's position, which was widely echoed among 20th-century philosophers, famously expressed skepticism towards the possibility of knowledge, i.e. towards the human ability to make true judgments: at most, he argued, we can make judgments that depend on the way we are made, perceive and reason. It is therefore very difficult to understand how things really are if, in the final analysis, all knowledge depends on us.

If you think about it, the fluctuations in interpreting Covid-19 seems to reflect the Nietzschean idea, all the more so because scientists, in expressing their views, have not shown the absolute harmony that people hoped for and politicians expected. In the early stages of the contagion, in fact, some virologists observed, data at hand, that the disease was not very different from the flu in terms of mortality and of the relationship between asymptomatic and serious cases. The most significant differences were likely to concern the higher number of patients admitted to intensive care, and the fact that Covid-19 had given signs of particular speed in terms of spread of contagion. Other virologists, instead, took an opposite view, namely that the flu was something entirely different, suggesting that the Covid-19 disease should be tackled through targeted strategies.

In this confusion, it should be noted that philosophy – especially the kind that still welcomes echoes of Nietzsche's reasoning – has not been of much help. Giorgio Agamben, for example, in an article published in "Manifesto" on 26 February, roughly supported the thesis of the scientists who interpreted Covid-19 as a variant of the flu, and reinforced it with the conspiracy component, which is always very appealing. The question Agamben posed is essentially this: if it is little more than a flu, as some scientists claim, why does the state take such oppressive measures in terms of restricting personal freedoms? Perhaps someone is artfully building this narrative to exert a form of capillary control over people's lives? In short, does power want to make the state of exception permanent?

So let's see what we can learn from this situation. These are, indeed, things that concern at least four major areas of our life: common sense – that is, the ordinary way of conceptualizing reality –, science, politics, and philosophy.

Common sense and science. Agamben's thesis is evidently absurd and makes instrumental use of certain positions expressed by scientists. In this sense, it is useful to make a few observations. There is a common-sense objection that we can make to the proponents of the thesis of the flu variant. It is the same argument that Moore opposed to Kant, who considered it an epistemological scandal that the existence of things outside of us – that is, outside our minds – should be accepted by faith. To prove the existence of my hands – Moore argued – I just need to raise them, move my right hand while saying "here is my hand" and pointing at it with my left hand. That's it. It is enough to exercise common sense to show that the flu and Covid-19 are not only not the same thing but probably not even similar things: what happened in China allowed one to draw these conclusions already a few weeks ago.

Science and politics. Then there's another point. Medicine is not an exact science, and neither is economics. This means, first of all, that the epistemological status of these sciences is different from that of mathematics or logic, but also of physics. Medicine and economics are empirical sciences that formulate hypotheses starting from a reality. Now, reality is not infinitely interpretable, and fortunately imposes strong constraints. However, it does have a margin of interpretability, which means that agreement among scientists is usually not absolute. A degree of disagreement, in fact, is part of the epistemological structure of science itself. Nonetheless, we are not allowed to conclude from this that the virus is a construction of the system or that climate change is not a real problem. It is typical of science not to express completely unanimous opinions, because that is the way it is, but the role of politics remains fundamental. It is clear that, within this framework, the exercise of political decision-making cannot be substituted by science.

Science and values. Another point that I believe should be of interest to the scientific community is the relationship between science, reality, and the values to which scientists refer when formulating their opinions. What does it mean for empirical sciences such as medicine or economics to be confronted with reality, especially when models or statistics seem incapable of explaining what is happening despite being formally correct? For example, even in the now highly unlikely scenario, in which the flu will cause more deaths in absolute terms than Covid-19, would this really indicate something significant when compared to the collapse of hospitals that are no longer able to treat the sick, cemeteries that can no longer welcome the dead, or entire communities in which children cannot stand by their dying parents? What values, in addition to objective data analysis, guide the formulation of scientific hypotheses?

Philosophy. Finally, let's come to philosophy. Great philosophers have never made fun of reality, simply because they generally regarded it as the most serious of all things. To explain its complexity they invented metaphysics, analyzed circumstances, reformulated problems,

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imagined possible worlds. They challenged it, like Nietzsche (who was defeated), but generally respected it. In my opinion, Agamben's position, in being unnecessarily radical, at this moment in history, has two faults, both of which are particularly serious: it is superficial and it is irresponsible. It is superficial because it tries to explain a very complex reality by means of a single idea, the conspiratorial exercise of political power, and it is irresponsible, in the double etymological sense of the word *respondeo* (*answer for* something and *answer to* someone), because it takes philosophy away from its main task, i. e. the commitment to provide non-dogmatic explanations through the exercise of critical thinking.

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