



COVID19 PRESENTS US WITH THE 4TH NARCISSISTIC BLOW TO HUMANKIND – NOT ONLY LEADERS NEED TO RECOLLECT THEIR HUMAN QUALITIES

COVID19 is not only a still rather unknown virus, it is also a threat to humankind in general. Only enormous precautions, an almost complete standstill of public and economic social life, seem to be the choice of the actual moment to contain the virus and its infections. Until so far this virus entered the human world through a Whuan animal market – so wildlife and animals are as nature in itself not to be managed as easily as thought. A little virus, also part of nature, takes over and governs the rulers of the biggest countries. Hence, we can see the virus as a contingent rupture which might entail a new notion of our relationship with nature and earth. The virus and its effects demonstrate the frailty and fragility of humankind which can be easily and completely disrupted. (Of course, this virus or other viral diseases are one of many disruptions, others with also large effects could be Vulcanic explosions or meteorites coming from the Universe - included in the concept of nature). It seems that the virus is telling us and teaching us that we, the human race, are not the ruler of nature. In that sense the virus can be attributed a symbolic function. Neither our technologies, global networking and globalization, are helping us, rather the contrary. And in addition, our moral capacity is deeply questioned on different levels. **I propose that we can understand the effect of this (and other) virus as an expression of the 4th blow to human narcissism: we are not the ruler of nature.**

To explain quickly: it was Freud who in 1917 talked for the first time about the three **blows to human narcissism** at the hand of science. The first was when we learnt with Kopernikus that the world and thus humankind is not the center of the universe. The second developed by Darwin finding out that human life came out of animal life. And the third was described by Freud as that we and our Egos are not even master in our own house, the unconscious is the final ruler. Although this says also something about Freud's narcissism, it illustrates that our anthropocentric worldview has already received some deep cracks ... So now a tiny little virus adds to this and tells us, that we are also not the master of nature and earth – neither technologically, nor morally.



First, I would like to reflect about our wish for being the ruler of the earth and why this illusion is a blow to human narcissism, **secondly** I will ponder the results of this insight and **thirdly** I would like to clarify what it means for all of us, not only for leaders.

The illusion of being the ruler of the earth and the resulting blow to human narcissism

Before COVID19 there was a belief that we had already won our struggle against nature, that we had conquered nature and tamed its most ferocious forces. Before COVID19 we (= most of the western world) thought that we had more or less subjugated the earth. We have not only explored, but exploited nature as if she was endless, we have developed a global network around the world, where people, goods, news, technologies and science travel. And we seemed to follow what is already said in the Bible is said: “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” – without any consistent questioning of how far we can go. It seems as if there is no built-in break in the human race that would control an “overheating of the engine” finally leading to its destruction. The boundless believe in our endless power has certainly **traits of megalomania** – one of the reasons why action against climate change on individual as well as societal level never really worked out so far.

And now a tiny little creature brings societal and economic life to a complete standstill. Not only that it came suddenly over us being unprepared, it spread easily over the whole world in no time, it costs life and it seems to be unmanageable. No vaccines, no medicines have yet been developed, five months after its first detection. To stem the spread is extremely difficult and makes the virus an enemy which some nations even try to combat as if they were in war.

The spread of the virus and the standstill of society engender overwhelming feelings of helplessness, anxiety, denial, fury and anger and all of these feelings are pointing to **the loss of dominion**. They make us feel (more or less conscious) narcissistically injured. We are hit in our belief that we can manage everything, that we as human beings are some kind of hero being capable of subduing everything around us – our belief in technology and science have



supported this belief. But nature “takes over”, some people even say that nature fights back since we did not listen and act well enough with regard to climate change.

Pondering this insight

It also teaches us a very different other lesson – in most religious belief systems and in most philosophies for a good life, moral choices play an important role for being a good human being who deserves a good life. Different ethical approaches help us find a way to behave morally - to act with good intention (deontological ethics) or for the right (consequentialistic) or the most positive outcome (utilitarianistic ethics). Here, under these circumstances there is **no good or moral choice possible**. There is no human life which is worth more than any other human life. Italian and American doctors have personally experienced triages and have felt the tragic and pain in doing so, almost unbearable for them. Nature does not have an ethical system and does not make morally good choices. This is a blow into the face of the human race which is so proud of the moral capacity which differentiates us from animals. Nature seems to force us to fall back behind our civilized way of being.

But if nature is neither good nor bad than **how can nature justify** what happens to us? Going back again to Christian belief system (Sorry, I do not know other belief systems well enough to write about them) we find a famous example how impossible it is to justify destruction and pain. Hiob quarreled with Jahwe, because he was sent pain, illness, loss and destruction – and he stayed loyal to him and was willing to accept and to continue believing in him, however he wanted Jahwe to justify for the destruction and the pain he created for him. In the two answers Jahwe gave, he indirectly surrenders while expressing also indirectly that he was not able to justify his doing. Hence, he made it very clear that the earth is not there for us, that illness and death are part of life and that there does not need to be reason for pain and suffering – it just exists as well as the beauty of life exists.

When we finally agree not to have any explanation nor justification – e.g. the virus came over us to punish us or the meaning of the virus is to help us change our life or it was the enemy who sent us the virus - we tend to call this destiny. (P. Scherle)



Also Philosophy supports the 'no -justification-answer': life "has no object other than life itself. Life here is a possibility, a potentiality that never exhausts itself in biographical facts and events, since it has no object other than itself." (G. Agamben) So, we can say, that the life of the virus has no other object than to live!

However, it can teach us a simple and not artificially or defensively morally burdened lesson of nature - it is there for itself and not for us. In using the words of V. Di Nicola the virus presents a **rupture, totally contingent, unpredictable and (so far) uncontrollable**. A rupture is a painful moment, when something unexpected and fundamentally different happens. A rupture needs to be reacted towards, where no reaction would also be a reaction. When we can understand this rupture as 'event' (in the language of the French philosopher Alain Badiou) it can lead to an opening for new possibilities. Then novelty and real change are possible. When the predicament is mishandled, it could lead to trauma, closing down the possibilities. (Di Nicola applies this to the individual, but I would like to widen his perspective for groups, organisations and society.) To make the rupture into an 'event' with an opportunity for change we have to (self-)contain and stay true to this event and integrate it - without containment and integration the rupture can become a trauma which will be difficult to heal and where there are no more possibilities.

What does this mean for us human beings? Not only, but also leaders need to demonstrate their human quality

First of all, when an illusion is taken away, it is often difficult to accept it - that we are not the rulers of the earth – it might cause a shock to imagine this, denial can kick in as well as all kind of other psychosocial defences. Dealing with this narcissistic blow is therefore the first step – the insight needs to be understood and integrated in our belief system. Only then we can imagine, what to do and how to react best and only then we can see the potentiality in it.

Obviously, nature or mother earth need more of **our attention, need more respect, more caretaking, more understanding, more co-operation and co-living** with her, instead of



thinking we can overtake and subjugate the earth (and not only earth since we plan already excursions to Mars etc). I assume that we also have to rethink our relationship with science and technology to not expect endless megalomaniac-like salvation. This certainly entails the relationship between humans and machines and might lead to a different future than the one described by R. Kurzweil, where artificial and human intelligence completely merge into one.

Most necessary is to rethink our relation to ourselves as humankind. If we finally cannot subjugate nature, then we have to think about how to be the best part of it within the possibilities of our human nature and its qualities. The question then is: **What makes us different from other living beings? What can we contribute? How can our nature serve as well us as mother earth?**

What comes to mind are **emotional capacities** like love, empathy, altruism (although some animals seem to have some of these latter capacities too). More unique to us are **the mental and emotional capacity** for self-reflection and for responsible actions and **mental capacities** for **thinking**: reasoning, strategic thinking, and planning which all builds on an elaborated **language, creativity** (for artistic, scientific and technological creations) and **humor**.

Combining emotional with mental capacity turns us in the direction of personality and character. Aristoteles' thinking can be a helpful compass in private and in organizational life. I assume here that what brings a good life to us also entails a good life together with nature. For him striving for **eudaimonia or happiness**, which represents the highest human virtue, is a goal in itself. By happiness he does not mean unrestrained selfish hedonism, but excellence in task or activity. His notion of **excellence** stands for being 'in accordance with virtues' and should be applied to the task or the function the individual has in life. Virtues are achieved by practicing good actions. Possessing and exercising virtue delivers the best life possible for a human being (see Nicomachean Ethics). It means taking conscious and self-controlled decisions in accordance with the individual way of being - Virtue is thus a state of character concerned with choice. (Aristotle II.6). The Greek concept of **Sophrosyne** is closely linked to it. It is interesting in so far that it combines and balances emotional excellence with rational excellence –it stands for being balanced by being prudent (rational) combined with a



peaceful mind (emotional). Our responsibility is finding the balance between these two human qualities and by this offers us a moral and rational compass. As Karl Homann puts it applying it to our actual situation: **we do not have to choose between humanity (health) and economy (money) but finding the right balance - because one is nothing without the other.**

We can resume that although nature does not make moral choices, the human being is capable of it, responsible for it, and thus should apply it in and for individual, organizational and societal life. Probably this is the best way to serve nature and us as part of it. And this is also the best way to deal with the 4th narcissistic blow.

Please take care of yourself and others and stay well and healthy,

Best wishes

Claudia

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/covid19-presents-us-4th-narcissistic-blow-humankind-only-nagel>