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Where is Science Going? An Interview with Professor Giorgio Agamben

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Abstract

The political management of the COVID-19 pandemic has showed worrisome biosecurity issues, which are linked to the very nature of science as a self-declared, undeniable ‘truth’.

Keywords: pandemic, truth, science, biosecurity, naked life, delinguisticization of knowledge

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During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has published a series of thoughts, successively included into a book titled *Where Are We Now: The Epidemic as Politics* (Agamben 2020). The core of his thinking was the relationship between science and society, namely medicine and politics. Agamben highlighted the risks linked to the emergence of the concept of “biosecurity”, i.e., the blocking of all social activities in order to preserve “biological life”. How far can a society go to defend biological life? How far can politics stretch to control both society and the biological life of citizens?

Agamben’s book has generated different and mainly negative reactions. However, it is undeniable that it addresses some unavoidable questions we are currently facing. We were surprised to see that most of the arguments made against him were flawed by (unmentionable) ideological prejudices.

To deepen those questions, we propose herewith an exclusive interview with Giorgio Agamben.

Naked Life

The concepts of personalization and prediction are gaining ground in medicine. Thanks to new diagnostic tools and big data, medicine claims to predict the individual risk of developing certain diseases in life. Once these risks are known, people can be directed towards appropriate lifestyles. Besides these screenings for genetic predisposition, new technological tools known as “wearables” enable the constant monitoring of certain vital parameters. Today, they are mainly meant for sportspersons who want to continually improve their performance. Soon, however, they could be extended to all citizens. Apparently such an approach to medicine is guiding us toward what you have defined as life reduced to mere biology—“naked life”. Nonetheless, many scientists are questioning the ethical and technical feasibility of such a scenario. Would you share a reflection on this topic? Also, in your opinion, what should be done to reverse the trend?

In the perspective that you have outlined, the critical moment is crossing the threshold beyond which personalization, prediction, and screening are no more lifestyle advice and suggestions, but become legal obligations. This threshold has now been crossed. What used to be presented as a health right has become an obligation to be fulfilled at any price. Cardiovascular diseases represent the most frequent cause of mortality in our country. We know they could decrease if we practice a healthier way of life and adhere to a particular diet. However, no doctor had even thought of their own lifestyle and dietary advice for patients to become the subject of a legal regulation, which decrees *ex lege* how to live and what to eat, transforming the whole of existence into a health obligation. Moreover, the Italian doctor's professional oath prohibited this by mentioning, "respect for civil rights regarding the person's autonomy" (see also WMA Declaration of Geneva: "I will respect the autonomy and dignity of my patient" and "I will not use my medical knowledge to violate human rights and civil liberties, even under threat"—*translator's note*). This is what has happened for COVID-19. At least for now, people have accepted not only to give up their constitutional freedoms, social relations, and political and religious beliefs—they have even let their loved ones die in solitude and without a funeral. In this sense, it can be said that human existence has been reduced to a biological fact, to a naked life to be saved at any cost. This happened despite the IFR, i.e. the real mortality rate of the disease, is less than 1% according to studies reported in your journal. A process of increasing medicalization of life has occurred. The unity of the vital experience of each individual, which is always both corporeally and spiritually inseparable, has split into a purely biological entity on one side and a social, cultural, and emotional existence on the other. Such a fracture is by all evidence an abstraction. This abstraction, though, is so powerful that people have sacrificed their normal conditions of life to it. I said that the splitting of life is an abstraction. However, as you know, modern medicine realized this abstraction around the middle of the 20th century. It did it through intensive care devices, which can keep a human body in a state of pure vegetative life. The intensive care unit, with its mechanical ventilators, cardiopulmonary bypass, and equipment for maintaining body temperature can indefinitely suspend a human body between life and death. This is a dark area, which must not go beyond its strictly medical boundaries. Instead,

what happened with the pandemic is that this purely vegetative life, this body artificially suspended between life and death, has become the new political paradigm for citizens to regulate their behavior. What is most impressive in what we are experiencing is that—at any price—a naked life is kept separate in an abstract way from an intellectual and spiritual life. Then, it is imposed not as a criterion of life, but of mere survival.

Truth and Falsification

In 2016, Nature published the results of a survey revealing that over 1,500 scientists had failed to reproduce data obtained by colleagues. Dr. Glenn Begley, the oncology director of the multinational corporation, Amgen, encountered the same problem in 2011. Before investing several million euros in a new drug research project, he had decided to replicate the 53 experiments on which their development strategy was based. He could only replicate 11% of them (Baker 2016; Begley 2012).

Paradoxically, science is facing an unprecedented, deep crisis of credibility when it comes to the reliability of the data it produces and the truthfulness of its statements. Despite this, it seems almost impossible to bring out hypotheses and results other than those that are universally recognized as "scientific truths" at the level of both public and academic opinion. Further, political and economic decisions are often made on the basis of these truths. You recently published a post: "On True and False". Would you help us further investigate this issue?

Here, we see first hand that the problem of truth is not an abstract philosophical problem. Rather, it is something extremely concrete, which determines the life of human beings in a considerable way. As far as scientific truth is concerned, a famous book by Thomas Kuhn had already shown that the scientific community's dominating paradigm is not necessarily the truest, but simply the one that is able to conquer the largest share of followers. This is also real, now, beyond scientific truth. Humanity is entering a phase of its history in which truth is reduced to a moment in the movement of the false. In other, more precise words, this movement is the omnipervasive unfolding of a language that no longer contains any criteria for distinguishing what it is true from what is false. True is that speech which is declared as such and which must be kept true, even if its

untruth is proven. In the end, it is essential for the system that any distinction between true and false fades. Hence, confusion grows among conflicting news that is even spread by official bodies. This means calling into question the language itself as the place where truth manifests itself.

Now, what happens in a society that has renounced the truth and in which human beings can only silently observe the multiform and contradictory movement of falsehood? In order to stop this movement, everyone must have the courage to ask the only question that matters without compromise: what is a true word? From the Gospel, everyone can recall Pilate's well-known question to Jesus, which Nietzsche considered "the subtlest joke of all time": "what is truth?" Actually, Pilate had responded to Jesus' immediately preceding statement, "for this I have come into the world: to testify of the truth". In fact, there is no experience of truth without testimony: true is that word for which we cannot but commit ourselves to bear personal witness. Here, the difference between a scientific and a philosophical truth emerges. In fact, while a scientific truth is (or at least should be) independent from the subject who enunciates it, the truth we are talking about is such only if the subject who pronounces it is wholly at stake in it. Indeed, it is a veridiction and not a theorem. Faced with a non-truth imposed by law, we can and must testify of the truth.

The Disappearance of the Hypotheses

In one post, you pointed out that the concept of "news" often substitutes that of "idea". Hence, the expression "fake news" was introduced as a weapon for silencing ideas or hypotheses. In your opinion, why do people—regardless of education—still believe the news whose falsehood has been well documented? What communication strategy should a scientist use if he or she has valid documentation proving the falsity of the official narratives?

In a society that is no longer able to distinguish true from false, news necessarily tends to replace reality. The media operate on this omnipervasive substitution of news for reality. Today's media are a key tool of politics precisely because they guarantee this replacement that is so essential to the functioning of the system. In a world where only news exists, only the dominant news is true and, at the limit, no news is more true than another. Hence the need to set up, as our government in

fact did, a commission for deciding which news should be considered true and which news should be false. In notes taken during World War II, Heidegger defined the age in which he was living as "a machination of the nonsensical" where an absolute absence of meaning is algorithmically formulated and relentlessly calculated. What we have under our eyes today looks like that.

The Betrayed Oath

The first point from the modern Italian version of the Hippocratic Oath reads, "I swear to practice medicine in autonomy of judgment and responsibility of behavior, countering any undue conditioning that limits the freedom and independence of the profession." How much autonomy do doctors still have? Is the very figure of the physician being transformed into something new? What do you think the doctor-patient relationship of trust will be like in the future? How do you relate personally to your own doctor and the care for your health?

What you have mentioned is just one of the points of the professional oath that are systematically transgressed today. In addition to the aforementioned points 4 and 5 about respecting the patient's civil rights and autonomy, point 15 is also threatened. This requires the need "to respect professional secrecy and to protect the confidentiality of everything that was shared with me, that I am observing or have observed, understood, or intuited in my profession or by reason of my state or office." While this confidentiality was always observed in the past, anyone who is positive (even simply positive, not just sick) today is publicly denounced as such and isolated. Consequently, even point 6, which requires the need "to treat every patient with care and commitment, without any discrimination", is transgressed. We have reached the point where the doctor does not visit positive patients.

It is difficult to maintain a relationship of individual trust with a doctor who also acts as a representative of a governmental system. Medicine and therapy must remain separate from power and legislation.

Medicine as a Religion

In several contributions, you have presented the idea that medicine and science have become today's religion. However, many doctors and scientists would find it hard to perceive themselves as representatives

of this religion. Perhaps we are referring to different concepts while using a single name, such as medicine or science? Would you help us distinguish what kind of medicine and science have turned into a religion?

The analogy I was suggesting is not merely metaphorical. If we call religion what people think they believe in, then science is certainly a religion today. However, a distinction must be made in every religion between the dogmatic apparatus (the truths in which one must believe) and the cult, that is, the behaviors and practices that derive from it. The common believer could ignore the dogmas and heresies that theologians had passionately debated. Likewise, the common person of today can completely ignore the scientific theories that scientists argue about. However, the cult, i.e. the practices and behaviors increasingly define him or her, and this is particularly true for medicine. Furthermore, just as the Christian religion proposed salvation through the cult, so does medicine target *health* through therapy. The first is about sin and the other is about illness, but the analogy is clear. Health in this sense is nothing other than a secularization of that “eternal life” that the Christians hoped to obtain through their cultural practices. The medicalization of life had already been growing beyond all measure in recent decades, but it has become permanent and all-pervasive in the situation we are experiencing today. It is no longer a question of taking medicine or having a medical examination or surgery, if necessary: the whole life of human beings must become the place of an uninterrupted worship at every moment. The enemy, the virus, is invisible and always present and must be fought with no truce in every moment of one’s existence.

Transhumanism

More and more funding for science comes from the IT industry. This has launched numerous researches on the merge of man and machine which, on the one hand, represents a new market. On the other is a new promise: potential human faculties and prolonged life. What do you think of this progressive digitization and robotization of life?

I think it is appropriate to consider the phenomenon you are talking about in the perspective of the development of the human species. We owe the idea of pedomorphosis or constitutive immaturity of homo

sapiens to a brilliant Dutch scientist, Ludwik Bolk. Almost a century has now passed since he had foreseen that the technical apparatuses humans increasingly rely on to survive as a species would have reached a point of extreme exasperation. There, these apparatuses would have reversed into their opposite and ended up causing the end of the species. Paul Alsberg discussed the external technological projection of body organ functions in the ’20s of the 20th century. He showed that the result is the progressive deactivation of these organs in favor of the artificial instruments that replace them. While the animal adapts its bodily functions to natural conditions, man deactivates them, entrusting them to artificial instruments. Thus, every exosomatic technical progress corresponds to a regression of the endosomatic functions. But if this regression goes beyond a certain limit, then the very survival of the species is called into question.

I believe we are at this threshold today. However, experience shows that what seems inevitable does not always happen. In the words of Euripides: “The expected does not turn out; for the unexpected the gods find a way”.

Language

You pointed out that the very terminology seems selected to support a paradigm of society. For example, the term “social distancing” could have been different, e.g. “personal” or “physical” distancing. Do you think the language is somehow spun, or rather, are we already so immersed in a new governance paradigm that such a language emerges spontaneously at all levels of society? I mean—like some sort of natural evolution? Many scientists have long struggled with misleading and inappropriate terms and yet, despite numerous strong arguments, we are unable to influence the universal language. What are the mechanisms that make certain terms acquired and consolidated?

The relationship between humans and language, and the experience that the speakers have of their language is not simple. Perhaps this is the first problem that thought must deal with. Language is something that human beings try to master and manipulate and, at the same time, it is what they have always been dominated and determined by—something that must necessarily be dealt with.

It goes without saying that the great transformation wrought by modern technology and science would not have been possible without a profound change in the experience of language.

The ancient world could not and did not want to have access to science and technology in the modern sense. The reason is that—despite the development of mathematics (significantly not in algebraic form)—its experience of language could not refer to the world in a way purportedly independent from how the world revealed itself through language. Language was not a neutral tool, replaceable by figures and algorithms. Rather, it was the place where things first reveal themselves and communicate in their truth. Only the reduction of language to a neutral instrument, which took place with Ockham and the late nominalism, allowed the delinguisticization of knowledge which culminated in modern science. Truth moved from the realm of words and language to that of numbers and mathematics. Language became a system of pure conventional signs and looked, at least in appearance, as dominable and manipulable. Since then, it was no longer the place of a possible truth. Now, precisely a language that is no longer related to truth can turn into a prison—a sort of machine that seems to work autonomously and from which it seems we cannot get out. Perhaps human beings have never been so helpless and passive in the face of a language that increasingly determines them.

Philosophy of Nature

In the past, science used to be identified as the “Philosophy of Nature”. People like Goethe who were interested in science, philosophy, and literature were considered the most intelligent. Today, science has turned toward a constantly increasing specialization that has undoubtedly led to enormous technical-scientific advances. These are two radically divergent paths. What do you recommend to young students and researchers who are taking their first steps in the world of science today?

An important moment in the history of the West is when philosophy realizes that it can no longer control science, since science has enfranchised itself from it. This is perfectly clear in Kant. His philosophy represents the last attempt to maintain a relationship with science, aiming to be a doctrine of knowledge capable of setting limits to any experience. I do not think that

anything similar fits the tasks of philosophy today. The relationship between thought and science is not played on the level of knowledge. Philosophy is not a science—nor can it be resolved into a doctrine of knowledge. In fact, science has shown that it does not need it at all. Philosophy is always about ethics. It always implies a form of life. Now, this is true for every single human being and, therefore, also for every scientist who does not want to give up being human. Of course, scientists have shown that they are ready to unscrupulously sacrifice ethics for the interests of science. Otherwise we would not have seen illustrious scientists experimenting on Nazi camp deportees. I would remind a young person taking his first steps in science to never sacrifice an ethical principle to his own will to know.

Resistance

You spoke of the need to develop new forms of resistance. What do you mean? Can you give us some examples?

I am a philosopher, not a strategist. Of course, the clear awareness of one’s situation is the first condition for finding a way out. I can only add that I do not believe today’s way out necessarily passes, as perhaps it has been long believed, through a struggle for the conquest of power. There can be no good power—and, therefore, no good state either. We can only, in an unjust and false society, attest to the presence of the right and the true. We can only, in the middle of hell, testify of heaven.

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