

Epidemics, Precariousness, and Vulnerability

Introductory Remarks toward a Rethinking of Life

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“Ci si abbraccia per ritrovarsi interi.”

—Alda Merini¹

Thinking within Precarity

There is no denying that the time we have recently inhabited has been—and will most likely be remembered as—a time of heightened instability, uncertainty, and general sense of disorientation. Everything has seemed pervaded by a precarity that has manifested itself at various levels, from health to politics to economics to family ties, jobs, social relations, and institutions. To what end is also somewhat (still) uncertain.

This volume gathers fourteen contributions written by Italian philosophers within the context of the specific form of contemporary precarity that has suddenly surrounded us in conjunction with the Covid-19 epidemic. Due to the epidemiological development of the disease, it was when it first reached Italy that the epidemic's impact and shocking effects began to escalate to the global level. Strung together by the pandemic, the chapters gathered in the collection vary greatly in terms of approach, content, style, inspiration, background, provenance, and the institutional affiliation of their authors. Some of the contributors are well renowned, long-established philosophical figures in the Italian academia, whereas others are junior thinkers with very active records of research, scholarship, and publications. Various

stages of life—philosophical, professional, existential, and personal among others—are thus represented in the volume.

The heterogeneity of the contributions is fluidly yet solidly and richly held together by two features. First is a discursive form that, while being academically scholarly and rigorous in style, is deliberately agile and stripped of indulgences in excessive philosophical technicisms, textual commentaries, and bibliographical references. This sobriety results in an elegant, incisive, and direct prose of great effect and immediacy—a captivating, compelling, and at times moving narrative not difficult to relate to. Second, and more significant, is the candid, lucid, and explicit confrontation with a common theme of profound relevance carried out in conversations with an array of such diverse thinkers as Jünger, Sloterdijk, Hegel, Foucault, Agamben, Arendt, Esposito, Cavarero, Levinas, Sontag, Butler, Mbembe, Jankélévitch, Derrida, Preciado, Plato, Aristotle, and Merleau-Ponty, just to name a few.

Despite possible initial assumptions with respect to the likely content of the volume, the common theme of the collection is neither the 2020 pandemic per se nor the prolonged state of emergency that has resulted from such an epidemic outburst. Some Italian thinkers, most notably Giorgio Agamben, have hastily questioned the medically dictated restrictions imposed during the pandemic and have assimilated them to an oppressive state of exception by a biopolitical form of governance invested in the exaggeration, or even the invention, of the contagion.² The alleged goal of such a biopolitical move, which Agamben qualifies as “health terrorism,” would be the deprivation of individuals of their personal rights and freedoms in the service of neoliberal, capitalistic, bioeconomic world forces of a despotic nature. References to biopolitical dispositives of governance as well as notions of contagion, disease, and the implications of the concrete ways (rules, ordinances, indecisions, failures) with which the Covid-19 pandemic has been managed certainly constitute the (more or less explicitly thematized) constant and, possibly, even inevitable background on which the chapters are situated. Yet the philosophical concern of the volume is oriented by an overall perspective that points *beyond* the pandemic—whether as a biopolitical or exquisitely biomedical event—toward a future that the present, with its epiphanies of precariousness, calls us to rethink and, possibly, reshape. Ultimately and jointly, the two elements—pandemic and precariousness—function, in this volume, as motivation, occasion, and framework or *cornice*, as we could say employing a term familiar to scholars of the *Decameron*, the masterpiece of Italian literature by Giovanni Boccaccio, which also unfolds in a time of epidemic.³ The two circumstantial elements thus constitute simultaneously the context, subtext, and pretext

within which to think or, better, to rethink that which is mostly affected by the pandemic yet does not end with it—that is, life.

By addressing life as its ultimate, shared theme, the volume touches therefore on one of, if not *the*, most characterizing features of human existence. In this sense, the volume is not at all rendered a merely occasional, opportunistic, or provisional work by the contingency of the coronavirus pandemic. On the contrary, its perspectives and interrogatives go well beyond the sociopolitical and medical contexts within which the chapters originate and are historically and geographically situated. The underlying conviction that emerges from the volume is that what is precarious is, in fact, not time—the time of pandemics we live in or any historical time—but life itself.

As stated above, life is, ultimately, the essential topic this book is about: life, living beings, the precariousness that is life itself, and the need—which possibly marks a radical change and even a transformational heresy within the current socioeconomic conceptual model—to rethink life, in a time of precarity (or, perhaps, in the precarity that the time of life is), as itself precarious. What will the implications of this be? How does the pandemic, what it represents and exposes—precariousness and, ultimately, vulnerability—call us to rethink a notion of life, and of living, that is capable of confronting and sustaining, even though not immediately defeating, the pandemic itself? How does an episode of morbidity affect a possibly fuller understanding of life or, even, the configuration of a fuller life? How can the pandemic, and the precariousness it exposes, be interpreted in terms that avoid nihilistic drifts as well as the reduction of life to the so-called bare life or naked existence? Can such a hermeneutic move be dared and sustained? And what would this require, and compel to, at the ethical, sociopolitical, and economic levels? As the gaze of the rethinking of life is stretched toward the future of a life that exceeds its current conditions, the volume is as much descriptive as it is deeply utopian insofar as it also presents political aspirations toward a different life and mode of collective living.

Italian Epidemiographies

The fact that life is marked by the radical precariousness of its exposure to a disease made more lethal with age; by a contingency that strikes unexpectedly, somewhat randomly, and even indiscriminately; and by a fundamental fragility that affects all human beings became painfully and

unarguably clear to most, if not all, contemporary Italians at the emotional, experiential, and also practical levels—that is, beyond the abstractness of theoretical speculation and recognition—in the early months of 2020, as Lorenzo Bernini, Alessandro Bertinetto, and Alberto Martinengo among others vividly recount. In Italy, this was the time of the first lockdown and of ordinances such as the “#iorestoacasa [#Istayathome]” (March 10, 2020) and “Chiudi Italia [Close Italy]” (March 22, 2020) decrees. In a shocking and unprecedented way for contemporary people’s experience, these ordinances by the government put a stop to all nonessential travel, gatherings, and activities. As mentioned above, Italy was the first Western and European country to be highly impacted—medically, politically, and psychologically—by the disaster that later became known as the coronavirus pandemic.⁴

Officially announced first in China as the cause of cases of “anomalous pneumonia” at the end of December 2019, the virus revealed its presence in Italy at the end of January 2020, when two Chinese tourists who had contracted the virus were hospitalized in one of Rome’s main hospitals, the hospital for infectious diseases, Lazzaro Spallanzani. After the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the global state of health emergency on January 30 due to the slow yet progressive spread of the infection outside of China, on February 11 the new sickness received its own name, soon to become sadly infamous: Covid-19—“Co-” and “vi-” to indicate the family of coronavirus, to which the virus belongs, “-d” to indicate (in English) the term “disease,” and “19” to mark the year when the virus was detected. It was not until March 11, 2020, that the WHO elevated the health situation from the status of an epidemic to that of a pandemic. By that time, Italy had already been severely affected with respect to the number of cases. By that time, the virus too, like so many other aspects of contemporary life, had gone global—and no closing of points of entries, walls, or bans (against travel and travelers from specific countries) managed to protect against the spreading of the virus and, with it, its decentering, destabilizing effects on people’s lives.

Epidemics as well as epidemiographers have abounded in the history of medicine and cultures even though previous infections may not have reached the classification of pandemics due to the absence of a globalized setting the way we have experienced it in our times. Within the Western world, already in its remote origins, the first book of Homer’s *Iliad* begins with a description of the spreading of the plague among the Greeks; to them, the disease appears as vengeance, punishment, and even an expiation for an offense made against the god.⁵ Later, Thucydides gives us an incomparable description of the Great Plague of Athens, the one that caused the death of perhaps the most charismatic Greek leader, Pericles. It is this

account that, centuries later, inspires a similar description by the Roman poet Lucretius in book 6 of his *De Rerum Natura*. The scenes and actions of Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, are also staged on the background of the curse of the plague ravaging Thebes, which Oedipus' search for a culprit is supposed to remedy until his final cry of both pain and recognition that the plague is due to nothing else except himself. Chronicles of the plague, which at times takes up the role of metaphor for a more general sociopolitical condition of spiritual or moral corruption and degeneration, appear in texts by authors of various geographical as well as historical belonging such as, still within Western literature, Daniel Defoe (*Journal of the Plague Year*), Edgar Allan Poe ("Shadow" and "The Masque of the Red Death"), Alexander Pushkin (*A Feast in Time of Plague*), and, probably best known to most philosophical readers, Albert Camus (*The Plague*).

In these and numerous other accounts, the disease is interpreted as originating from a variety of causes, invested with multiple ideological functions, and fulfilling an assortment of purposes within the economy of human existence—revenge on the side of the god(s), punishment, penitence and expiation, appeal to life, natural occurrence, utter meaninglessness, testing and unmasking of the true nature of the human being, annihilation of the sociopolitical reality as known or constructed, state of exception, epiphany of an endemic destiny of corruption and putrefaction, act of (divine or natural) providence, instrument of divine salvation, and so on. In many senses, through the ranges of responses and interpretations they originate, epidemics, symbolized in the idea of plague, open up the metaphysical question of the existence, nature, and role of the negative, as Rita Fulco highlights—a theme provocatively and masterfully explored in the 2012 volume *Metafisica della peste. Colpa e destino* [*Metaphysics of the Plague: Guilt and Fate*], by acclaimed Italian philosopher Sergio Givone.⁶ Paraphrasing Paul Ricoeur's famous statement, in his *Symbolism of Evil*, that "the symbol gives rise to thought," we could conclude that the plague too gives material to thought.

The hermeneutic frames of explanation and signification into which various narrative accounts insert epidemics are many—both in the past and in the present. Most literary accounts also provide a *theoria*, in the Greek sense of overview and representation, of anthropological and sociological reactions and responses to the disease—whether such reactions are a matter of ideological positions, behaviors, or emotions. Constant throughout the ages, these reactions and responses are not absent from our times either. A theater of human types is thus put on display in the various narratives—from negationists to alarmists, conspiracy theorists, opportunists, self-proclaimed scientists, indifferent, resigned, concerned, philanthropist, scared,

combative, socialites, segregationists, isolationists, even fanatics uplifted by what is perceived as a test (of one's faith, courage, humanity, survival, and so on). Plagues—as well as the language used to describe such events, as Alberto Martinengo points out—become metaphors for so much more that occurs in life. They become some kind of litmus test for one's conditions of existence, for one's attitude and response toward life and what or who is encountered in it. And yet, as Olivia Guaraldo reminds us, there is a serious danger in the overmetaphorization of diseases: namely, the risk of erasing the fundamentally embodied nature of life and its experience, including the attitudes of the living, whose being alive depends on acts of embodied (individual and, even more, collective) sustenance, responsibility, and care.

Illustrative in this matter is, to remain within the realm of Italian literature and to the purpose of disclosing the metaphorical role played by the plague in terms of a representation of the variety of embodied human reactions, the description provided by Boccaccio with respect to the 1348 plague that ravaged through Florence as well as the rest of Europe. It will not be surprising that Boccaccio's account perfectly anticipates the contemporary attitudes in their gamut from initial shock to pandemic fatigue. Boccaccio begins his *Decameron* by retracing the origin of the epidemics in the East, highlighting the uselessness of all medical and social measures of mitigation and containment, describing the symptoms in those affected by the contagion and its transmission by some who bear no sign of it, noticing the leap from animals to human beings and vice versa, and remarking on the self-induced social and physical distancing to which most individuals resort in the hope of preserving their personal health. Following that, Boccaccio offers a few paragraphs that focus on the relinquishment or abandonment, on the side of the Florentines affected by the disease, of all previous standards and habits—of moral decency, of social norms and customs, of civic respect, of natural bonds and practices—which end up being brought to an extreme, whether by surplus or by deficiency. Epidemics bring about a situation of interruption, Boccaccio seems to indicate—human beings feel suspended, held on the verge of an abyss where everything is possible; and their customary, embodied habits, whether natural or conventional, are also suspended. The time of epidemics is a time of suspension, of awaiting where one does not know what one awaits—perhaps, one simply awaits the end, either of oneself or of the epidemic. That is, one awaits the suspension of the state of suspension. One awaits the time when one's embodiment returns to being an occasion for physical proximity, close bodily contacts, and embodied celebration.

As is the case in much of Europe, the Italian landscape is dotted with artistic memories that stand, often solitary in their monumentality,

as embodied and collective markers of the passage of previous epidemics. Churches, chapels, fountains, columns, hospitals, paintings, and other products of creative expression were erected either to rejoice at the end of a contagion or to invoke its quick and forgiving passing. In addition to numerous chapels devoted to San Rocco (the saint protector from the plague), creativity in the times of plague is to be credited for famous artistic masterpieces such as the Church of Santissimo Redentore and the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, the Obelisk of San Domenico in Naples, the Church of Santa Maria in Campitelli in Rome, the Croce della Peste in Rho (near Milan), or the Pala della Peste by Guido Reni in Bologna, just to name a few. The epidemic origin of many such legacies had, however, faded in the Italian cultural memory as these artistic creations—sanitized of their origin and admired for their artistic splendor—became incorporated into the uplifting landscape of beautiful creative works from the past, with which they assimilated. At the onset of the 2020 pandemic, all this changes, and the landscape becomes a painful reminiscence of past epidemic outbreaks, almost like skin butchered by marks left by a disfiguring infection. At the same time, natural life continues its course, indifferent, oblivious, even strengthened, emboldened, renewed by the sudden absence of most human inhabitants, as if the pandemic might be the herald of a possible environmental redemption—dolphins are even sighted swimming in Venice’s Canal Grande, whose usually murky waters have transformed into “water crystal clear enough to see fish swimming below.”⁷

The Italian experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is filtered through two previous accounts of plague epidemics. Even though unthematized and hardly named in the chapters collected in this volume, these past contagions have sedimented in the Italian unconscious and powerfully and vividly resonate within the Italian collective imaginary while Italy passes through the twenty-first century-strain of the disease.⁸ The chronicles of two past contagions occupy, in fact, a prominent place in two major works in Italian literature, and generations of Italian students have familiarized themselves with such texts, internalizing them to a great extent as they constitute mandatory readings during the impressionable years of everyone’s high school education.

The first of such epidemics is the already-mentioned 1348 plague (the infamous Black Plague), which a group of ten wealthy Florentine youths (seven women and three men) attempt to escape, as the wealthy have often done and keep doing, by retreating to an idyllic farmhouse in the hills around Florence. To entertain themselves during the time of segregation, each person will tell the others a story, for ten days, thus narrating the one hundred novels that constitute the content of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

Through literary fiction, one of the issues, among many, that Boccaccio's work brings immediately to the fore is the socioeconomic privileges and injustices of all epidemics and the related problems of the accessibility of the health system and the universal right to medical care—questions certainly pressing in the neoliberal, privatized health systems that have eroded the traditionally public nature of the Italian medical care structure.

The second famous epidemic is, for Italians, the 1630 plague that is incorporated in Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*], whose account is based on original historical documents and reports such as a “*Storia della peste del 1630* [History of the 1630 Plague]” by Giuseppe Ripamonti, the *Ragguaglio* [Report] by Alessandro Tadino (a doctor and officer in the Tribunale di Sanità, the public health department) as well as various *grida*, the public health ordinances by the Milan government.⁹ The novel is some sort of romantic tale in which love, lust, compassion, power relations, political denunciation of ill-governance, injustices and abuses, aspirations to political freedom, trust in the providential vision of history, and enlightenment ideals of rationality, planning, and good governance coexist. A major topic brought to the fore by Manzoni's account of the plague is the general difficulty in recognizing epidemics and the overall unpreparedness and disorganization of political governments and medical authorities in managing the spreading of infections.

The two epidemiographies provided by Boccaccio and Manzoni differ greatly in terms of the role of the epidemics within the narrative discourse that unfolds around them. Yet both accounts agree in terms of the general sense of precariousness that the plague spreads together with the contagion—in terms of the uncertainty in recognizing the disease, the indecision in devising and implementing measures of mitigation and containment, the confusion of ordinances and decrees, the ineffectiveness of the measures taken, the subversion of standard norms and behaviors, the upending of previous and future plans, the sense of fear and suspiciousness toward everything and everyone, the flimsiness of judgment that turns everyone into an expert and true experts into suspects, and the suspension of the overall customary practices of life. The plague (the infection) becomes a pestilence (a way of being and living).

Precarity and Life

One could argue, of course, that precariousness, the feature that epidemics highlight to a perhaps unprecedented degree, is a condition of human existence. Few are the elements of certainty, in human life—that we are

born, that we are going to die, and a few other occurrences that Western philosophical ambition has tried to identify in what have been at times called transcendental conditions of existence or, more prosaically, facts of life. Ultimately, however, even the greatest certainty—death, considered so certain as to become the defining trait of the essence of human beings, characterized therefore as mortals—is truly a matter of deep uncertainty, perhaps the highest symbol of the overall precariousness that enfolds human existence. There is no way to ascertain ahead of time when and, moreover, how we are going to die, whether death is a blessing, a punishment, or nothing at all, how life after birth is going to unfold, and so on. Even with respect to some few alleged certainties then, there is no assurance, firmness, or security. Uncertainty reigns sovereign, one could say, and, with it, the precariousness of human life—a precarity that renders human existence fragile, unwarranted, unexpected, vulnerable and that, ultimately (and nevertheless), is also the source of perennial surprise, unlimited openness, and the wonder that, for the Greeks, gives birth to philosophy.

In its morbidity, certainly the epidemic raises questions of death and mortality, as Elia Zaru's considerations on necropolitics remind us. As various other chapters in the volume point out though (for example, Luca Illetterati's), precariousness is not necessarily tied to death and mortality. Precarity is rather connected to humanity and its life conditions. We undergo conditions of precarity well before we die. We are precarious because we are alive. That is what the epidemic brings to the fore. It is not by coincidence that, for the ancient Greek thinkers—Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, but also later thinkers such as Epicurus and even Epictetus—balance, that is, lack of precarity, the stability that is brought about by the harmony of life conditions, whether anthropological or cosmic, was considered a divine feature, a godly affair, which for humans translates into a metaphysical as well as an ethical-political aspiration or ideal, often equated to health, well-being, and happiness. As the ancient thinkers promptly acknowledge though, only the gods (or perhaps not even them, as Illetterati provocatively suggests) can be truly happy—complete, satisfied, without needs, lacks, wants, or even desires. Can a human life, marked by precarity, be full, complete, and happy? What does it mean to live a full life under the sign of precarity?

It is not necessary to be versed in reading Heidegger and his reflections on Greek *techne* and the *Gestell* to acknowledge that the dream of modern science and technology, at least from Bacon and possibly even before, has been precisely that of somehow trying to mitigate, to rein in uncertainties, precariousness, and unpredictability. As Luisa Bonesio poignantly hints in some passages of her chapter, the desired mastery is sought by exploring and establishing patterns of behavior through statistical analyses, by projecting

such patterns into the future through computational modeling, and, ultimately, by devising mechanisms of control and even manipulation of such projected models whose predictability is presented as, almost, certain—or, at least, as the most probable.

The dream is built on friable grounds, though, and undergoes repeated attacks whose memory of defeats is often obliterated (or conveniently overlooked). The loss of historical memory, at (most?) times more ideological than accidental, fuels the recurrent delusion of constant progress—itsself a feature of the modern conception of history—whereas what we may have is, more appropriately and as early eighteenth-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico reminds us, repeats, returns, steps forward accompanied by various steps backward, pauses, cycles, detours, blocks, and arrests. The struggle to eliminate precariousness seems endless because it is, most likely, impossible. Then precariousness is revealed as the marker of human existence, especially when understood in the sense of vulnerability (as for Guaraldo) or exposure to an excessiveness, an exceedance that constitutes life while life itself cannot contain it (as for Roberto Mancini, Claudia Baracchi, and Ugo Perone).

To expose, in our times, the fundamental exceedance of life to itself—its vulnerability to something that is itself living—on some indefinite day and through vectors that, despite all contact tracing, are hard to identify conclusively, a novel, invisible, miniscule, undetectable virus enters our vital universe. Its devastating effects progressively suspend those fragile mechanisms we had created to govern the uncertain. Ironically, the arrival of that virus too had been predictable and predicted—but the dream of control, turned into the delusion of omnipotence, made us blind, and we ignored the signals. As we slowly discovered (and keep discovering despite our difficulties to reckon with this and our repeated, and regularly frustrated, attempts at renewed investigations), the day and first vector of the viral entry—its origin—remain for the most part unspecified, likely unspecifiable, and possibly not unique as is perhaps the case for all origins, which may very well be better understood as plural rather than singular. Does the virus call then, as Perone asks, for a different metaphysics of the origins, for a different metaphysics altogether? Or is life simply a matter of biopolitics and of its counterpart, necropolitics? Is biopolitics, which has become one of the currently dominant philosophical paradigms to address life, sufficient to capture the richness of the phenomenon of life, especially of life marked by a precariousness the virus certainly exposed but does not create?¹⁰

The virus has a highfalutin name—coronavirus, the virus with a crown. In this, it is like death, which, in medieval iconography, was also often portrayed wearing a crown. The most deadly form of contagion our history

has possibly recorded, the Black Plague of 1348, is also known as the Black Death, thus establishing a line of continuity between contagion, death, and sovereignty. Who or what is sovereign, though? Is it death, in its being the universal and therefore democratic Grim Reaper? As Zaru reminds us, we all die, but not everyone dies benefitting from the same privileges of care and support. Or is the virus sovereign, whose level of infectiousness is certainly somewhat uniformly high but whose morbidity, whose ability to bring death, varies dramatically among the population based, at least partly, on various demographics, thereby creating novel discriminations and exposing and reinforcing customary ones, as Bernini observes? Certainly, this novel virus becomes sovereign in terms of dictating our conditions of life, as the title of a well-timed and fortunate book by Italian philosopher Donatella Di Cesare, *Il virus sovrano*, appropriately acknowledges.¹¹ The virus becomes the sovereign not only with respect to our scientific and technological projects, whose plans of containment miserably collapse while the parallel push to find a vaccine (and a cure) grows commensurately, but also and moreover in relation to our daily lives with their complexities and stratification (political, economic, legal, educational, artistic, and medical to name a few), which the virus brings to a halt.

With a vitalism and a vitality, with a strength of life (its own life), that are impressive in their being both evident (the virus affects millions) and sly (it affects us in ways, organs, and through channels and variants that are still unmapped), the coronavirus forces us to rethink our conceptual structures, our modes of existence and of what, with some pansemantic arrogance, we have gotten used to consider as life (whereas it is only, ultimately, the life of the human being). All of a sudden, we, Western thinkers for the most part heirs of the legacy of the Enlightenment—even when critical of it—and its ideals of clarity, transparency, rationality, and scientificity; we, who considered ourselves invincible because, thanks to science, we have conquered unimaginable spaces (from the Moon to Mars to the genetic modification of organisms); we, whose medical knowledge has defeated and, at times, completely eradicated deadly diseases like smallpox, hepatitis C, and even AIDS; we, whom the economic capitalistic and neoliberal system has convinced that at the center is always us or, rather, me, with my caprices advertised as primary needs, with my desires, in truth fabricated by the market economy, upheld as assertions of freedom and rights; we, perennially caught between Prometheus and Sisyphus; we, the self-proclaimed masters of the universe have found ourselves displaced, unprepared, fearful, confused, and, what is most remarkable, vulnerable—an observation that becomes the starting point or the necessary conclusion of many of the chapters in the volume.

We have discovered that the invisible—that little virus that is both nowhere and everywhere—is more powerful than the visible. Its strength has brought the entire world to its knees. It does not cut deals to anyone, it upends, it subverts our plans, gestures, and institutions while at the same time it exposes the injustices of our times (which are, in a way, the injustices of many, when not of all known epochs so far) thereby, once again, challenging our established notions of justice. Only the ancient and revered notion of truth, now somewhat considered obsolete, may have had a perhaps equally revelatory power. Life has come to a halt—or must be made to come to a halt through various, repeated political interventions known as “lockdowns”—because of the power of the virus, which either has imposed an end to the physical existence of many people or has forced us to a self-imposed suspension of our cohabitation and shared activities in the hope of stopping the vitalistic spreading of the virus by enforcing rules of physical social distancing. In ways and at levels that are too many to list, we have been exposed to, reminded of, and confronted with the precariousness of our existences—of our lives. “Stay at home,” “Shelter in place” have been the recurrent invitations that have resounded around the globe. What about those who do not have a home or a shelter, though? Or for whom home is not a safe shelter? Or for whom staying at home is not a viable option (essential workers, medical personnel, and so on)? The precarity of life is internally multiplied.

Life—what is it? Western thought, of Platonic descent (or, at least, influenced by a certain Platonist interpretation that may not entirely correspond to what may emerge from a close reading of Plato’s dialogues), has presumed that it could encapsulate the meaning of things within univocal concepts—fixed, eternal, and unrelated, easier to manipulate, control, and administer because they are contained within well-defined boundaries that map reality according to oppositions and dualisms marking delimitations as well as exclusions. Among such long-standing dualisms are beginning and end, inside and outside, friend and enemy, peace and war, truth and falsehood, mind and body, good and bad, up and down, vertical and horizontal, subject and object, culture and nature, male and female, self and other—and these are only a few. The task of thinking—a task that, as a matter of fact, is the outcome of a somewhat presumptuous and arrogant self-imposition—has thus become the identification of such concepts, their isolation, and the clarification of their meaning conceived, at the same time, as both originary and final, as primal cause and goal. As Perone adroitly observes, the so-called forms or essences were therefore conceived with the goal of providing us with an insight into the core of reality.

The notion of life too has been subjected to such schematism and, for a long time, philosophy has searched for its essential meaning and for the essential meaning of the subject, the human self that has arrogantly situated itself at the heart (or rather, at the apex) of life. Thus, through a complex and articulated process that unfolds across over two millennia of intellectual and cultural history, life—by which is generally meant human life, and here the anthropocentrism of this entire millenary project is disclosed—was for the most part made to coincide with the time of corporeal existence or earthly occupancy of the human subject, and *zoe* was opposed to *bios* (with limitations Alessandra Cislighi and Claudia Baracchi explore). The time of life-*bios* has then been seen as delimited by two other notions that act as boundaries and limits, namely, birth and death. As if life began with birth and ended with death, which therefore would be the opposite of life.

This conviction neglects, dismisses, or outright denies, however, that death is not the opposite of life (for some, including Socrates, death is rather the entry into real life) but rather, if anything, the opposite of birth. It is birth and death that constitute the two opposite limits of existence as we know of it, as Mancini notes. Life is, in itself, much more complex and comprises birth as well as death, health as well as illness, joy as well as despair, laughter as well as tears. Life is ambiguity, multiplicity, plurality of forms and perspectives that at times follow one another, at times coexist, at times intertwine in inextricable plots, at times even fight with one another, and, in all cases, refer to some other, to a relationality that is foundational of life. The fundamental ambiguity and interrelationality constitute the substrate of our tenuous attempts at disentangling some possible threads we may follow: the search for joy, the escape from pain, the consolation that strives toward holding everything together (consolation derives from the Latin *cum*, together and *solus*, the whole) without anything getting lost. Life is complexity, complicity, interrelatedness, and relationality. Its human subject, the human self that tries to find its way in the bundle of relations cannot be declined, as the modern, (neo)liberal, individualist tradition has taught, in its self-proclaimed isolation—I, me, mine, to me, for me—but must rather be conjugated, that is, inclined and stretched in various directions that pull it toward others and reveal thereby its exposure, its vulnerability, and its exceedance.

It is to the theme of vulnerability that most of the chapters in the volume refer in the effort to rethink life in the aftermath of the pandemic, as if vulnerability and exposure to the other were the pandemic's greatest truth, that which it reveals, to which it recalls and even compels. Vulnerability is the notion that the authors stubbornly, courageously, impressively refuse to

overcome, sidestep, or even overlook; that to which they relentlessly return; that which they attentively attend to from their geographical, institutional, and experiential positions across Italy—from Turin to Trieste passing through Pavia, Verona, and Padua; from Milan to Messina traversing Pisa, Macerata, and Salerno. In the various chapters, vulnerability gets to be articulated in a series of concepts that underlie, accompany, and expand such a notion once it is recognized as a fundamental marker of life. Thus, the discourse moves to attention to the body and to the formulation of an embodied subjectivity; to the concept of relationality and its anthropological as well as ethical and socio-political ramifications; to the notions of responsibility and care as fundamental correlates of a vulnerable, relational, and embodied subjectivity; to the need to stretch temporal considerations to include not purely the present in its immediacy but also the future (ours, our children, future generations, the world) as well as the past (ours, our elderly, history); to the call for social and environmental justice as ways to correspond to a renewed subjectivity and understanding of life; to the need to understand the constitutive elements of human life in terms that go beyond and yet are fundamental (such as the environment) to what such a human life would be; ultimately, to the demand, which comes from life itself, to conceive of life in terms that exceed what life shows itself being.

This Volume: An Overview

This volume has been organized in three parts. Part One, “Confronting Disaster,” is the most explicitly concerned with the coronavirus pandemic. Far from being merely expository though, it offers a philosophical contextualization of the disease in terms of theoretical considerations of both its place within the horizon of modern technology and its impact on various practices of daily life regarded as entryways into broader speculative reflections. The first chapter in this part is by Luisa Bonesio, a scholar of aesthetics, landscapes and the environment, and geophilosophy. In “Cassandra’s Details: Coronavirus and the Course of Globalization,” Bonesio analyzes the epochal relevance of three crucial events in technological modernity, namely, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the attack on the Twin Towers, and the coronavirus pandemic, which she philosophically interprets as prophetically revelatory of the violence as well as the precarity of Western techno-economic globalization. As is the case for the Greek figure, Cassandra, even though correct in their predictions, such prophecies nevertheless go unheard, resisted with incredulity and feelings of powerlessness.

The next chapter, “Improvising Self-Expression in the Time of a Contingency that Has Eliminated Contingency,” is by Alessandro Bertinetto, a

scholar trained in German Idealism and hermeneutics with research interests in aesthetics, philosophy of art and music, and image theory. Moving from an account of his personal musical experiences during the pandemic, Bertinetto offers a reflection on the implications of musical expression and rhythm for affective and intersubjective life and focuses on the connection between improvisation as an artistic practice and improvisation as a central feature of human life. In a situation like the one imposed on many by the Covid-19 epidemics—a situation that can be rightly considered as a deprivation of spaces of free interaction with the contingencies of life—human beings rely on their ability to invent the rules of their practices, including expressive practice, through their performances: an ability that nourishes artistic creativity, such as the “music from the balconies” during the early lockdown in Italy.

The personal perspective, which finds the author segregated in a condition of physical isolation associating all Italians during the harshest months of the lockdown, is the point of entry also for the following chapter by Lorenzo Bernini, a major voice in the Italian gender and queer debate with interests ranging from classical political thought to psychoanalysis to contemporary theories of radical democracy, feminist philosophies, and critical race theories. In “Out of the Choir: Bodies Inclined on the Playboy,” following an ironical yet poignant autobiographic opening, Bernini analyzes the pandemic as a reagent that enables a better observation of the biopolitical and bioeconomic dispositives that nourish and exploit hierarchies and inequalities having to do with class, age, gender, and race. Bernini privileges the lens of gender and sexuality as an apt way to focus the philosophical-political question of subjectivity emerging from the pandemic. With compelling clarity, Bernini highlights the role of the pandemic in exposing the (male) “hallucination” of “invulnerability” and points out the implications for bodies in “neoliberal technical-patriarchal societies.”

Part One concludes with a chapter by Alberto Martinengo, a scholar in the hermeneutic tradition with interests for themes in the philosophy of metaphors. In “Metaphor as Illness? Life, War, and Linguistic *Pharmakon*,” Martinengo focuses on the militarized metaphor of the disease as enemy and its fight as war—metaphors that have pervaded the narrative on the Covid-19 pandemic—and highlights some examples of the use of such a metaphor within political rhetoric. Martinengo wonders about the possibility of speaking of disease outside some recourse to linguistic figures. Explicitly engaging Susan Sontag’s metaphors of cancer, he proposes a philosophical-political reconsideration of the metaphor of sickness.

Part Two, “Vulnerability, Care, and Responsibility,” deepens the focus of analysis introduced by the previous chapters by considering how the pandemic calls for a reconceptualization of subjectivity understood in the

context of embodiment, relationality, vulnerability of embodied life, care of the body, responsibility, and body politics. Metaphoric applications to the notions of life, death, and illness, already a theme in Martinengo's chapter, are a critical concern also for Olivia Guaraldo, a political theorist who, after studying the thought of Hannah Arendt, works on investigating the theoretical and political relations between Italian feminist philosophy and Anglo-American gender theory. In "'The Lungs that We All Are': Rethinking Life in the Times of a Pandemic," Guaraldo warns against the political and moral dangers of the use of metaphors to address life, death, and illness, and focuses instead on a consideration of life in its material and embodied form for which vulnerability becomes a fundamental feature of the human—a feature that can hardly be expressed by metaphors. The experience of Covid-19 reveals in fact that there is no "enemy" that can be clearly identified, and we are all equally vulnerable (even though we are not equal). The pandemic thus offers an unprecedented occasion to reflect in extremely concrete terms on the concept of shared vulnerability and on care as a "viewpoint," a notion that Guaraldo explores at length as an alternative to the state's militarized discourse in its response to the pandemic.

The theme of the vulnerability of the body and its care is continued in the following chapter by Elia Zaru, whose research focuses on the crisis of modernity in contemporary debates. In "Necropolitics, Care, and the Common," Zaru reflects on the concept of necropolitics understood as the power over death exercised, within the current pandemic, by deciding which lives are worth saving and which are not. Against neoliberal necropolitics, Zaru discusses the idea of a "biopolitics from below" centered on the notions of vulnerability, care, and the common, which he considers as a possible solution to restore dignity to all lives injured by the ongoing search for profit that is proper to neoliberal economies and their biopolitical practices.

The reflection on the vulnerability of human existence continues with a chapter by Luca Illetterati, whose primary research interests include German Idealism, especially Hegel, a philosophical understanding of nature, and the philosophy of translation. In "Lacking Beings," Illetterati argues that for living beings, being is living—that is, an action, a dynamics in which the living being consummates itself in order to continue being itself. Need and lack belong to life and cannot be understood as defective moments whose overcoming would restore life to some prior positivity or future fulfillment. Ultimately, Illetterati claims, life is not different from the negativity that manifests itself in the need and lack interwoven with life's way of being. Negativity is one and the same with life and a mark of life's powerful fragility.

The theme of fragility underlies also the following chapter by Caterina Resta, whose work focuses on contemporary continental philosophy and, more specifically, on questions of the deconstruction of the subject, the notion of the human, technology and nihilism, and geophilosophy (especially in the context of globalization, the Mediterranean, and Europe). In “Vulnerable Existences,” after exploring how the twentieth-century search for “true life” and “the new human being” mutates into the necropolitics of the two world wars, Resta turns to a characterization of the contemporary human being as interdependent and vulnerable and argues for an assumption of responsibility toward one’s vulnerability as the foundation to address meaningfully what Aristotle considered as the main task of politics, namely, living well together.

An explicit confrontation with the notion of responsibility preoccupies Rita Fulco, whose research interest centers on the theoretical, ethical, political, and religious entailments of the twentieth century with specific attention to the philosophies of Simone Weil, Emmanuel Levinas, and Italian theologian Sergio Quinzio. In “Life and Useless Suffering: Responsibility for Others and the Impossible Theodicy,” Fulco begins with a phenomenological analysis of suffering that points to the impossibility of justifying it in the name of any theodicy, no matter how it may be configured. Focusing on the notions of neighbor and stranger, Fulco identifies vulnerability as the primal feature of the humanity of the human and indicates the call to collective responsibility as the most appropriate way to address the care for suffering and vulnerability at a level that intersects life and political institutions.

Life and its possible meanings and possibilities, introduced at several points in the previous chapters under the rubrics of vulnerability, responsibility, and care, are the themes that gain center stage in Part Three, “Rethinking Life.” In not always conspicuous or explicitly declared ways, this part also offers critiques and alternatives to biopolitical conceptions of life focused on bare or naked life (*nuda vita*) as well as to possible nihilistic drifts in front of the disaster. Part Three opens with a chapter by Alessandra Cislighi, a scholar educated in the Italian hermeneutic tradition of Luigi Pareyson and whose research interests span from philosophy and theology to the question of the human, the notion of the self and embodied subjectivity, and the hermeneutics of myths. In “Greek *Zèn*: Living Starting from the Origin,” through an analysis of Greek philosophical and theological sources on the notion of life, Cislighi points to the idea of life as an inexhaustible source, spring, and origin that allows for a regeneration of vital energy (*zoe*) via a second birth into individual existence (*bios*). A reading of the Edenic myth aimed at highlighting multiple levels and interpretations of the state of nature enables Cislighi

to argue against Agamben's concept of "bare life" and in favor of the recognition of the value of the fullness of living.

The topic of life is explored further by Enrica Lisciani-Petrini, whose scholarly interest centers on the intertwining of philosophy, politics, the humanities, and artistic movements in view of developing a philosophy of everyday life. In "Life and the 'Black Swan,'" Lisciani-Petrini intersects the precarity of embodied life in its concrete and organic dimensions with the theme of the existential finitude of life. The aim is to delineate a perspective wherein living beings are no longer seen in light of a delusional eternity but rather in the backlight of an unavoidable precariousness that makes them, with an expression from Jankélévitch, ever more "precious."

The notion of the finitude of the human condition is also a major concern of the chapter by Roberto Mancini, whose research interests include the dialogical theory of truth, the anthropology of human rights, the ethics of common good, and the development of a new economic model. In "What Finitude Does Not Say: Rethinking Life beyond Nihilism," Mancini criticizes the nihilistic ground of various philosophies of finitude that in different ways oppose life to particular living beings as they regard death as an experience that annihilates the living. Mancini advocates instead for a conception of life that carries within itself the aspiration to a form of harmony or fulfillment that does not coincide with death or the end but instead is linked to an immemorial past as well as to an unexpected future, thus opening the horizon toward dimensions that go beyond the particular individual human being.

The theme of precariousness as the underlying condition of life that, far from constraining life, opens it to dimensions of excess and the beyond is addressed in the chapter by Claudia Baracchi, a scholar of ancient philosophy whose research interests focus on ethics and the question of nature; philosophy in relation to myth, poetry, and theater; and Asian (especially Indo-Vedic) traditions. In "Writing Life: Biography, Autobiography, and the Remainder," Baracchi explores the implications of the writing of life, especially in the mode of (auto)biography, with the aim of showing the shortcomings of the biopolitical paradigm and its constitutive dichotomies. Precisely because (auto)biographical narrations are incapable of grasping elusive life, because the "documents of life" are ultimately destined to document their own finitude and remain open onto life's excess, they may begin to disclose, Baracchi argues, that the animal does not fall outside political life but rather grounds it, that *bios* is not without *zoe*, that ethics is not without bodies, and that the "I" is not without "we," even as nameless multitude.

The theme of the excess and exceedance of life over all possible descriptions (biopolitical as well as phenomenological or of other kinds)

continues in the last chapter of Part Three—which is also the conclusive chapter in the volume—by Ugo Perone, whose philosophical research has been devoted to subjectivity, time, memory, feelings, and the relation between philosophy and religion. In “With the Finitude of Life beyond the Phenomenon: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and a Metaphysics of the Finite,” Perone phenomenologically underscores the double feature of finite life, that is, both its consistency and its fragility due to the essential connection with the no-longer and the not-yet or nonbeing. This is a dimension that escapes phenomenology and can only be accessed through hermeneutic reason, which is open to the exceedance of reality and the beyond. Perone argues for a renewed metaphysics that can be compatible with modernity while remaining capable of understanding finite life in its transcending elements.

Conclusion

As the reflections collected in this volume thematize, the pandemic demonstrates and compels to acknowledging that life is precarious, vulnerable, and fragile. The chapters also underscore, however, that life is mostly or irremediably precarious when it is lived not as togetherness (which is possible even at a distance) but as isolation (which is different from solitude), when life is reduced to naked existence in the forgetfulness of its dimensions of exceedance toward alterity, the others, and the beyond. The consistency and solidity of life—which are not its fixity or stability—come from the recognition of its relationality, interconnectedness, interdependence, and, ultimately, solidarity (which, in the volume, is evoked through the notions of collective responsibility and communal care) that binds the parts into a whole—neither a homogeneous (or integrated) nor a fragmented (or disjoint) whole but rather something more similar to a choir made of unique, recognizable voices whose singing to life soars in the form of chorales and collective hymns. These songs would be elevated in and as celebration of communal life, which means both life together and the togetherness of life. In this way, life could never be exhausted or exhaustible in one, single, and separate dimension but, rather, would always be open to some other and, therefore, precarious as for its (limited) power and yet powerful through its (precarious) collective extensiveness. In other words, it would be a life that is always in movement, in contact, affective and affected, flowing, living life, life that is alive and never rests, life that goes on and must go on—as we have heard repeatedly in

the current times of precarity due to Covid-19—not alone but together, because life is greater than any of its life forms. Yet life needs each and all of them as they are what life itself is.

Notes

1. The meaning of this sentence by Merini oscillates between “We embrace each other to make ourselves [or one another] whole again,” “We embrace to become whole,” “We embrace each other to find ourselves [or one another] whole again,” “We embrace to be made whole once again,” and “We embrace each other to find out that we are still whole.” That is, the semantic ambiguity and multiplicity points to the interrelatedness of self and other in the activity of making (or finding or confirming) ourselves (or oneself or each other) whole—a holistic act that happens only together and as the result of an activity (a making) that is also and simultaneously an acknowledgment and recognition (a finding, a confirmation).

2. See Giorgio Agamben, *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2020) and *Quando la casa brucia* (Macerata: Giacometti & Antonello, 2020).

3. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin, 2003).

4. On the disaster as a form of de-centering, see Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

5. It should be noted that, in the past, the term “plague” was often generically used to denote epidemics that were in fact possibly due to other highly contagious and deadly diseases. Thus, based on the reported symptoms, the plague of Athens was, most likely, a typhus epidemic, whereas the so called Antonine plague was probably a measles or smallpox outbreak.

6. Sergio Givone, *Metafisica della peste* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012).

7. See <https://abcnews.go.com/International/venice-canals-clear-fish-corona-virus-halts-tourism-city/story?id=69662690>.

8. Whereas the epidemic Boccaccio described—as well as the one portrayed by Manzoni—was properly an instance of plague, which is caused by a bacterium (the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*), the coronavirus pandemic cannot be considered a form of plague as it is caused by a virus instead.

9. Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi*, trans. Brice Penman (New York: Penguin, 1983). The 1630 plague afflicts Milan on the heels of the descent into the Duchy of Milan, then under Spanish domination, of the army of the German landsknechts on the way to help militarily solve the political question of the dynastic succession of the Duchy of Mantua.

10. Such a paradigm, which characterizes, for example, the so-called Italian Thought or Italian Theory, has currently become so prevalent that it has often but inappropriately been interpreted by some scholars as a marker capable of rep-