

SERIOUSNESS IS THE STANDARD OF BOTH ITSELF AND THE FATUOUS

EDITORIAL

True seriousness seems to be always elsewhere than in its natural places – it is neither where it is invoked nor where it appears in the role of an admonishing power, and never where it chastises us with a raised finger, a respectable dress, or a frown of disapproval. Whether individual or collective, emancipatory processes typically affect conceptual references; seriousness is one of them.

The intuition from which we start is that the conceptual crisis affecting seriousness is one of the major features that characterize our time. In this context, by “conceptual crisis” one should understand a condition of extreme vagueness affecting a concept whose task should be instead that of *accurately* educating individuals to the kind of *respect due* to reality in all its specific manifestations.

As a concept, seriousness demands an effort of harmonization between an objective and a subjective side. The objective side is that something (be it a current or a potential situation) that imparts the need for an appropriate response to those within its domain, that is, to the subjective side. Sets of facts however convey nothing, much less necessity and appropriateness; thus communication occurs between an idea embodied in and revealed by reality and the subjects therein implicated. The response may be a simple acknowledgement or an act, a gesture, a complex strategy; what cannot be lacking though is attention, recognition, and respect. Respect cannot be general and formal; rather, it must be determined in a qualitative sense.

The minute of silence, the honor of arms, the flag at half-mast are examples of the art of harmonizing serious objectivity with gestures that signal, protect, and pay tribute to the presence of an idea within things, preventing its fading away. In all these cases, the answer is symbolic and is part of a well-known and shared cultural repertoire. Here, we are dealing with “great occasions” and symbols, both characterized by an extraordinary resistance to the passage of time.

Another group of examples where an unequivocally serious reality calls for and generally receives a compatibly serious response has to do with events of “great fear.” Communities or at least some individuals are found to become supportive, brave, tenacious, and dignified when they are confronted with disasters. Let us assume that this is true: these are serious reactions, qualitatively in harmony with the specific quality of the situation. Likewise, indignation toward outrageous behaviors (such as satire, looting, corruption, vanity), which are understood as such by virtue of a certain idea of necessary seriousness, signals that individuals are capable of detecting deviations from the only correct response. This occurs regardless of the moral fibre that individuals then display in practice.

This ability disclosed in extreme experiences to extract moral resources from human beings is proof of an irreducible residue of the most comprehensive civic virtue we can conceive of. Even more, it is proof of the universality of its concept. One point at least

seems in fact beyond doubt: we are capable of seeing seriousness, of distinguishing it, that is, of conceiving of it. Furthermore, at the very moment when we conceive of it, we place it on high, isolating it as something sacred.

If we shift our attention from exceptional to normal situations, the landscape changes dramatically though. Common sense seems to have only an emergency system for the recognition of objective seriousness and the dosage of subjective respect – a system that does not ignite in the case of day-to-day administration. And yet all what would be required would be that the same concept, with its rich and valuable articulation, were allowed to intervene in all cases. It would be sufficient to let every situation reveal itself in light of the concept of seriousness we are capable of conceiving of.

One could say of seriousness what Spinoza thought of truth², namely, that seriousness is the standard of both itself and the fatuous. In its positive and embodied self-evidence, seriousness is also immediately effective because it can generate serious energies in response, and it can separate from itself false seriousness as well as vanity.

What seriousness discloses in its rare epiphanies is its a posteriori unequivocality. Combining this element with its irrelevance in everyday affairs creates a philosophical problem and several social issues.

The philosophical problem is the breach in the trust relation between thought and true ideas. True ideas manifest themselves in any case, but with no consequences, and amidst widespread indifference. This does not conflict with the fact that we sometimes implicitly recognize the universality and necessity of such ideas. The passive acceptance of the contingency of judgments and criteria peacefully coexists with a rough and unreflective load of strong and diriment values. Dogmatism and relativism live under the same roof; they share their domain with no previous and deliberate decision about this. Dogmatism occasionally causes healthy and sometimes violent moments of purification and clear indignation; relativism deals with the daily work of clouding up our judgment. For the former, everything goes badly; for the latter, everything goes well.

The effort to keep open possibilities for listening and recognizing ideas in the occurrence of things and in real life has withered. We look away from ideas and focus on things (mute and changing, simply factual, neither true nor false, neither serious nor fatuous, neither good nor bad, neither just nor unjust) and on their referent in the inner sense, that is, on opinion.

To think about what is truly serious in one's experiences and what one must do in order to correspond to the call to seriousness that comes from reality is an act of attention and research; such an act is not based on a value that we can extract from a dusty old code of inviolable norms. Not cultivating this competency amounts to losing the desire and ability to negotiate on any topic. To think is to negotiate, and to negotiate is to think. Both have to do with *true* seriousness, that is, with seriousness as a concept.

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(translated from Italian by Silvia Benso)

² See B. SPINOZA, *Ethica*, II pr. XLIII Scholium.