

A Call to Cease the Use of War Metaphors in the COVID-19 pandemic

World Emergency COVID19 Pandemic Ethics (WeCope) Committee (14 June 2020)

Preamble

As an independent, multidisciplinary and crosscultural committee, comprised of experts from cultures and nations across the world, we urge all to reconsider their language, stating:

Recommendation 1: *In communications relating to COVID-19 and coronavirus, any reference or metaphor belonging to the semantic context of war must be avoided.*

War is sweet for the inexperienced, said Erasmus of Rotterdam. Using the metaphor of war to describe a pandemic means underestimating war, taking it as a challenge or a fight, almost normal, and quite natural. What we are facing is not an enemy who has a clear will to destroy us; it is a virus, a natural organism with no personal will, and if anything has enhanced its destructive action, it is years of unfortunate ecological management by the humans. There is no invasion from another planet to this world. Everywhere, and especially those with less resources, are paying the price of a globalization without a soul, without respect for natural resources and unfortunate ecological mismanagement by human beings.

The use of the war metaphor is extremely dangerous because it risks transforming preventive public health procedures into instruments of social control. The emergency of war requires total mobilization against the human enemy, and not taking responsibility for the damage that can be caused to other people, as in the case of the pandemic. There is no one to kill in a pandemic, but there are many to defend against the possibility of an infection. It is not a question of acting aggressively against another person or even defending yourself from another person, but of defending others from ourselves.

In warfare, gas masks are used to defend us from a weapon used by other people, but masks in a pandemic are mainly used to protect others from our potential breathing out of infectious droplets. The situation is exactly the opposite of war: the use of face masks is an act of love towards others, not an act of defense against an enemy. We are asked to keep our distance not from our enemies but from our friends aiming to isolate the virus. We are not building physical trenches but social barriers that allow the well-being of others and limit the damage that we could do.

Recommendation 2: *Particularly with regard to communications aimed at children and adolescents, it is necessary to differentiate the situation caused by the virus from that of war, with detailed examples.*

The use of the war metaphor is especially dangerous in education. Telling the kids that we are at war means presenting war as a natural response to an emergency, with an aggression that is not appropriate. Children have the right to grow in a safe and healthy planet where there are sensible ways of uplifting one another's morale for managing a pandemic that do not terrorize their lives. The language of the government and leaders must give inspiration to the youth and the next generation without using the pandemic to instill fear in people. Words affect people psychologically and emotively and have psychological consequences. The virus has not attacked us out of an evil deed; it is taking advantage of the mistakes in human approach to the nature with rapid globalization on a fragile base. But war is nothing natural; it is the worst of the choices that human beings can make and must never be used as a metaphor to define what is instead a strategy of resistance against a virus that must find us united as brothers and sisters, without ever using the word enemy.

Recommendation 3: *It is necessary to avoid any form of stigmatization towards those who do not respect the health rules, inviting them to change their behavior but without pointing to them as enemies.*

Any form of stigma distracts public opinion from the real goal of fighting the novel coronavirus but not groups of humans whatever their behavior. Furthermore, stigmatization produces an effect of infantilization: one is led to believe that the population as a whole is unable to comply with the rules and that there are particular groups that do not have this ability. This can lead to discriminatory behavior, including ableism, ageism, classism up to actual racism. Stigmatization can cause a shift in the way one thinks and there are behavioral consequences.

Recommendation 4: *Safety and preventive measures must always be presented as emergency measures against the virus and their duration must be limited to the period of time necessary for the safety of the community.*

Michel Foucault's analysis of the political management of plague and leprosy are pertinent. These diseases, spread throughout Europe, were used for social control purposes; it was the territory, in its physical subdivision and the regulation of spaces, that constituted an instrument of control and became more and more pervasive. When in the 17th century a sphere of intimacy took form, almost immediately the political tactics for violating it were created. In the current situation, it is necessary to be cautious in the analysis; credibility should not be given to the conspiracy readings. It is necessary to understand that every standard and every control device, put in place exclusively for health reasons, may lend themselves to be used for other reasons, unless citizens become democratically aware of the situation and pay close attention to what may happen in the future. For instance, the automatic download and installation of tracking software for contact-tracing without an active opt-in option should be critically evaluated.

Using a safety device such as a face mask, or maintaining a safe physical distance, when implemented through understanding and awareness, is different from being subject to an imposed standard. Wearing a face mask so as not to harm someone else is a profoundly moral act; it is not a question or paranoia of others as possible danger, but on the contrary, of attending to our own behavior in respect to the wellbeing of others. This should constitute the transition from passively accepted norms to internalized norms with the fulcrum on the relationship between the self and the other, during the pandemic.

Recommendation 5: *Research should be conducted to find the most suitable language to define the attitude of human beings towards the pandemic. One possible choice could be the term resistance.*

In an emergency, each person should put in place personal and collective resistance strategies, so it is a matter of resisting the virus from a medical point of view but also of behaving in such a way as not to harm other persons.

Very often when we speak of individual responsibility we consider ourselves as isolated individuals, a kind of abstraction, owner of rights and duties. The link between responsibility and autonomy is sometimes so close that the fulfillment of one's duties seems to be indifferent from the relationship with others, as in "I do my duty to be able to enjoy my rights", the focus is on 'me' and 'my' duties and rights.

The coronavirus emergency has reversed the situation; I wear a face mask so as not to harm other people, and I keep social distances first of all because I could hurt others. The ethics of the self, to be defended at all costs, as if it were a city besieged by the enemy, has been turned

upside down in the ethics of the other. We ask children to stay at home not because they are particularly at risk, but especially to protect their grandparents; all this could be a reversal of the relationship between individual and community. It is not the community that imposes rules on the individual, who perceives them as limitations, but it is the individuals who limit themselves because this is the only way to belong to a community. I don't come first, and strictly speaking, nor does the other, but the relationship between the self and the other is the foundation of everything.

It is the relational aspect of COVID-19 and its preventive measures, which must be at the center of ethical reflection. The community is not made up of wandering atoms, of people who fear the other, but of relationships that redefine the subjects within them, in their micro- and macro- relationships which then build the social totality, in which the recognition of the other is the premise for self-recognition of the ego.

Inter-connective metaphors should bring cohesiveness and encouragement during a pandemic. One should not experience loss of control or feel disempowered, nor should they feel that there is a possibility of non-compliance from their perspective. The pandemic can be a turning point for many citizens to develop new ways of thinking, to encourage cooperation to contribute positively to everyone's well-being instead of reinforcing the possibility of others being victimized while dealing with preventive measures. Social measures should foster a sense of encouragement and a greater sense of responsibility. The operational models and dynamics from a social consciousness perspective should be fostering and nurturing especially for preventive measures for health and well-being.

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