

Association of Christian Philosophers of India

ACPI Special Series - 5

**THINKING THE HUMAN
AND THE PANDEMIC**

Philosophical Perspectives on Pandemic
Phenomenology

*Memories of an untold and unforgettable Time
to mark
the Memories of those acutely lost lives in the Pandemic Covid-19*

Association of Christian Philosophers of India

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THINKING THE HUMAN AND THE PANDEMIC

Philosophical Perspectives on Pandemic Phenomenology

Edited by

Jojo J. Varakukalayil



Association of Christian Philosophers of India &
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Vijnananilayam, Janampet, Vijayarai PO

Eluru-534475, West Godavari Dt., A.P.

alumkaljoy@gmail.com

Ph: +91 8547939641

&

ATC Publishers

Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre St Mary's Block

No. 5, Nandidurga Road Benson Town, Bengaluru 560046, India

Tel: +91-80-25491999/2999; +91-7090100444

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FOREWORD

COVID-19

Nudity of Human Pride Denuded! Reality of Human Finitude Exposed!!

Dr. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, OFM Cap

We, the humans, were taken by surprise by the surprising appearance of the Covid-19 pandemic, as we were totally unprepared for this terrific happening! Humans were caught from all sides by insecurities of all kinds—physical insecurity, economic uncertainty, social isolation, information-manipulation, medical exploitation, religious ambiguity,...etc. After the immediate response of total puzzlement, the thinking people began to reflect and to give thought about the humans in the light of the covid-19 happening; I too join with them and try to give expression to my vague thought and reflection.

1 Nudity of Human Pride: An Inflated Self

The first and main targets of this pandemic were the economically and scientifically top countries in the world; this gives us some food for thought for the thinking people—money and power, science and reason, growth and progress are no protection against Covid-19! The nudity of human pride is denuded! ‘Nudity’ refers to the unmasked situation of reality—reality without any masks! The masks used by the humans to hide their nudity are the ‘power of reason’ and the ‘claim of progress.’ The nudity of human reality covered with the masks of pride—the ‘power of reason’ and the ‘claim of progress’—was laid bare in the happening of covid-19. An opportunity offered itself for a violent stripping of human ego of its pretended claims! The covid-19 pandemic has made the human to stand exposed in one’s nudity of ‘human finitude,’ manifested in one’s *powerlessness* and *helplessness*! When one’s nudity is exposed, one can become ashamed; shame is the awareness that I am just as the other sees me! If I am excessively ashamed of the reality of my nudity—human finitude and powerlessness—then I will try to hide my nudity with various masks. In order to hide the reality of one’s radical finitude, one exposes and highlights in an exaggerated manner what one is not, namely, the *power of reason* and the *never-ending scientific progress*, as a result of which the focus of attention is diverted from the *reality* of human finitude to one’s disguised

identity! The covid-19 pandemic has stripped the human bare and exposed one's hidden nudity—the human finitude and powerlessness!

We do not take the phrase 'human pride' in the moral-spiritual sense, as opposed to the virtue of humility; we take 'human pride' in the philosophical sense of considering one's ego in exaggerated exaltation. The human has a leaning to prop up one's subjectivity, one's ego. This leaning can be expressed in terms of Marcel's notions of 'being' (*être*) and 'having' (*avoir*): desire of *being* someone and desire of *having* something. Although both are closely related, the first one specifically refers to *human pride*, and the second to *human greed*.

In the process of 'objectifying' the reality, according to Heidegger, the humans pose themselves as 'subjects'; the process of 'objectifying' manifests itself even in the crude forms of manipulating and subjugating the object. The powerful want to exploit and to have control over the weaker. Thus the human subject manifests itself in its domineering character of human subjectivity with unbridled 'freedom.' Levinas too finds that western thought-pattern has been considering everything with an encompassing and totalizing stance; this totalizing and domineering tendency is a never-ending urge to be oneself above every other self! Thus the source of human pride consists in the totalizing tendency of the narcissistic subjectivity (Levinas), and/or in the domineering tendency of the metaphysical subjectivity (Heidegger). In other words, the human *pride of being someone* makes them subjugate and swallow every other with insatiable and never-ending urge to be higher than everyone else.

The human pride of *being someone* is kept strengthened by human *greed for having* more than everyone else. One's 'having' or possession has become the criterion of one's 'being.' In the world of today, possession is valued in terms of money. The power of money has become today almost the only criterion of one's 'standing' (being) in the society. The desire to *have* money and possessions has no limit. There is a craze and competition for more 'having,' since it is presumed that one's *having* enhances one's *being*. Thus the pride of my *being someone* is largely built on the strength of my *having*.

2 Self-Exaltation with Presumed Ability and Achievements

The pride of my *being someone*, strengthened with my *having something*, shows itself as exalted in my presumed *ability with the help of reason*, and in my pretended *progress with the help of science*: the 'arrogance of reason' and the 'claim of progress.'

2.1 'Arrogance of Reason'

Western philosophy was formally born with the three great masters—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; with human being defined as 'rational animal,' '*reason*' was installed high on the pedestal. The pre-Socratic poetic insights were transformed into logically precise and rationally defined metaphysical concepts—subject having intellectual (conceptual) domination over the object. At the period of Enlightenment, the subject, strengthened with the power of reason, became the arbiter and controller of truth! Such a reason-controlled and logic-dictated philosophy of Enlightenment is sarcastically characterized by Raimon Panikkar as "*the hunt for truth with the rifle of reason*." Reason became more arrogant!

I too am prone to think, taking cue from Panikkar's thinking style that the humans with their presumed superiority use reason as a weapon to *deceive* and to *convince*. With the help of reason, the human has a presumption of superiority. Our civilization is armed with reason, that makes us conquerors by *con-vincing* (*cum+vincere*) others rationally. The original meaning of *logos* received a 'violent change' of meaning in the process of translating it into *ratio* in Latin; it was a change of approach to truth and reality. As reason got upper hand in philosophy, the 'symbolic' and 'mystery' dimensions of reality are forced to be forgotten. The '*world of mystery*' got substituted with the '*world of mastery*'—in the language of Nietzsche, 'art' got substituted with 'truth.' Gradually reality began to be seen in terms of precise concepts, as a result of which 'philosophy' as truth or *logos* was born, and metaphors as art or *mythos* died, and this situation of the domination of reason continued to grow in its arrogance!

2.2 Claim of Scientific Progress

Along with the claim of the power of reason, humans have been growing in their claim of scientific progress. There is no doubt that science has made great advance in their findings and achievements. But has it made the humans progress in all respects? Can they claim to be totally certain and secure? Let me quote from Martin Heidegger (1889-1976):

No epoch has had, as ours has had, notions so numerous and varied of man. No epoch has succeeded as ours has, in presenting its knowledge about man in such a fascinating and effective way, or in communicating this knowledge in so rapid and easy a way. Yet it is also true that no epoch has known less than ours what

man is. Never has man assumed so problematic an appearance as he has in our times.

Heidegger's point of consideration is the knowledge about the human, which has reached such great heights as never before. But in spite of the human being thoroughly analyzed with reason, we know the least about the human today! The human remains a 'mystery' insofar as it remains an enigma, despite the power of reason and the so-called scientific progress. The *culture of certitude* started by Descartes leads to the *civilization of security*. But certainty and security are only unfounded claims of the humans; during the Covid-pandemic we have experienced that our claim of *certainty* and *security* is simply meaningless!

Much of the progress and development that humans have made is tagged with science. The greatest victory of the scientific human is control over Nature; but s/he has not succeeded to have control over oneself. All the progress that humans have made is material progress. They, with their scientific rationality, develop a special 'cleverness' to exploit others and to make use of their helplessness. The human has attained great powers by a crash progress in industry and technology. The diminution of human sufferings owing to the advances in medicine is beyond all calculations. But,...when the covid-19 appeared, all our medical advancement had to accept its helplessness!

3 The Need of a Change

In order to clarify the 'change' that is called for, we need to take a quick look at the critique of the exaggerated exaltation of reason, made by some of the contemporary thinkers.

3.1 Critique of the Reason-Centred Thought

Nietzsche is the main thinker who spearheaded the critique of the 'power of reason' with his twofold proclamation: '*death of God*,' and '*decadence of reason*'; it means, what has been held as sacrosanct in the West for centuries—metaphysics and dogmatic theology with absolute certainty, universal morality and cultural ideal, etc—has begun to lose its ground. Thus the long period of *decadence*—reign of *universality*, *eternality* and *rationality*—has come to an end. He was announcing the irrelevance and impossibility of holding to anything that transcends time and space. Heidegger has systematically worked out his critique of the metaphysical stance of Western philosophy. The process of transforming the pre-Socratic poetic insights and artistic intuitions into logically precise metaphysical concepts was started with Socrates, Plato and

Aristotle; it was a shift from *mythos* to *logos*, from *art* (poetic thought) to *truth* (conceptual philosophy).

This critique was born from a collective experience of ‘suffocation’ under the reign of ‘dogmatism’ and ‘precision.’ Philosophy has been comfortable in having based itself on a rational foundation. As the solidity of such a rational foundation is called into question, a ‘step-back’ (*Schritt-zurück*) to the uncontaminated source of Western thought is found necessary. Such a revolutionary *uprooting* of philosophy and culture from the rationally based foundations was made possible by the critique made different thinkers.

3.2 The Reality of the Human as Radically Finite

From a presumptuous stance of human arrogance because of the power of reason and scientific progress, we need to reaffirm to ourselves that humans are radically finite; the pandemic has helped us to be convinced of it.

In the contemporary thought-pattern the myth of dogmatic certainty stands destroyed! Philosophy today has opted for a more dynamic and humble attitude: *dynamic*, because every reality is philosophically seen as becoming; *humble*, because there is no claim of absolute certainty about what is philosophically seen. The term ‘philosophizing’—as different from ‘philosophy’—reflects such a philosophical *dynamism* and *humility* of being constantly in search, taking serious consideration of the elements of time and space. Human life is a process of journeying or ‘becoming oneself.’ This becoming-process is a constant journeying to one’s *beyond*, while standing *with* one’s being. We characterize it as a journeying ‘*with boundary*’ and ‘*beyond boundary*.’ We shall limit ourselves to clarifying that humans are *radically finite* or ‘with boundary.’

The notion of ‘boundary’ is relatively of recent origin, and in the wake of the philosophy of finitude in the contemporary period, it is gaining greater importance. The ordinary meaning of *boundary* as ‘limit-line’ was given a philosophical meaning by Karl Jaspers in his notion of ‘*Grenzsituation*’ (limit-situation), which was taken over by Heidegger to refer to the radical finitude of humans. For him, human finitude is nothing but the permeating presence of the *limit* in one’s being. Humans are finite, not because they are less than the Infinite; they are finite because they *are finite in their very being*; they are ontologically finite, which manifests itself in the various ontic situations. Human being is thus radically finite—human being is *with boundary*.

* * * * *

We conclude this reflection with a plea—a plea to keep on creatively journeying ahead without uprooting oneself from one’s given finitude. The pandemic of Covid-19 has exposed the nudity of human pride and arrogance, brought about by the exaggerated presumption of the power of reason and scientific achievements. Our journeying forward must be armed with human finitude, and not with the arrogance of reason and science. The pandemic has laid bare the *inability* of reason and the *incapacity* of science! We, the humans, have made a miscalculation about our power and capability. If the nudity of ours is taken positively, we will be more realistic in our self-assessment; if not, we will continue perpetuating our imagined power, which is bound to blow itself off. Hence let our thinking and acting be solidly rooted in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of one’s life and world, without any pretense or claim of absolutism.

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Dr. Jojo J. Varakukalayil

I

The pandemic Covid-19 has wreaked havoc globally leaving its demonic and ghost like presence in all fields of human life. Human history has always progressed through many anomalous and devastating situations like Black Death known as the plague that killed 200 million people in the 14th century and the Spanish flu in 1918, and today we face the pandemic Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, we have learnt lessons from plagues, viruses, and pandemics such as influenza, Ebola, AIDS, and cancer that attacked and uprooted our daily life in the past century. But, what we face today is a new end of a world order. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 has its impact over all spheres and dimensions of human life such as physiological, psychological, existential, social, spiritual and the ecosystem at large.

Human being is threatened both from without and within, and the pandemic has led us to physical and social isolation and distancing, existential anxiety, losing of one's own dear and near ones, insecurities of all kinds - biological, immunity, health, economic, and life itself, and there is also an unprecedented denial of truth about pandemic through the avalanche of fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories from all corners. Undoubtedly, no one could instruct us exactly what one must do and one must not do. The only source of information supply was from the social media platforms that mostly remained inaccurate, insufficient and most often it had nothing to do with the real situation with the truth. The post-truth era reigned over this dark period of the history. Everyone seemed to try the game of a noble lie as Plato spoke in his *Republic* to let things go in its course. Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' remained very pertinent to the contemporary situation of Covid-19, where all of us were in a cave like situation and no one had any perspective on truth. Social media played a crucial role in darkening and shadowing the truth that remained unattainable. We were tied to the fetters of our own false vision

and no one could break such compelling forces of the dark and dim cave like situation. Such a tiny virus could take control over the most sophisticated animal, the human, effortlessly.

In Greek, the word ‘*epidemos*’ means someone who is in the ‘*demos*’, who circulates among people of a certain community and endangers their lives. Judith Butler rightly notes that “Pandemic is etymologically *pan-demos*, all the people, or perhaps more precisely, the people everywhere, or something that crosses over or spreads over and through the people. It establishes the people as porous and interconnected.”¹ It means that *pan-demos* spread all over the world without limiting to any geographical state. It affects the entire population. “There is no border that stops the virus from travelling if humans travel, and no social category secures absolute immunity.”² Interestingly, the Covid-19 virus circulates among people all over the world without leaving anyone, old/young, male/female, black/brown/white, theist/atheist/agnostic, rich/poor and we find no one is excluded. We are left to the perils of perplexity and no ray of the light of truth ever seems to free us from the cannibalistic approach of this tiny virus that choked the human breathing by attacking on the respiratory system and muting all organs to malfunction. Senses were impaired not only to think on humanity and human existence, rather to breath and feel life in its most original and natural sense.

Human life and the world order has been brought down to a pitch where uncertainty of all kinds rules over, and no one can escape this tiny virus and the only consolation is to cut off from all kinds of social connections that one enjoyed. We are forced to remain isolated and socially distant not only from the common public but all the more from one’s own dear and near ones. This situation has been differently hitting the human existence, primarily, from all the vicissitudes of life. We are sure that there are no experts on Covid-19 at the moment: everything is being learned in the field. Be it doctors, scientists, social scientists, politicians, world leaders, or religious leaders of any faith and praxis, no one has an answer, or solution to the issue we face today. Hence, we can just be sure that human existence after its expeditious journey to the XXI century, we are nowhere; by this, we do not mean to say that we are lost in oblivion and perils, rather all our endeavours are only human endeavours, so to say, we are just finite beings who eschew mortality at every breath of our life. No claim of human supremacy and dominance, definitely, can give us a

1 Judith Butler, *What World is this? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 5.

2 *Ibid.*

ray of our primacy over anything and anyone, rather we are left to experience life as a bare fact of life itself. The finitude of human existence as the bare fact of human condition.

The bare fact of human life is that it is no longer bare anymore; we cannot exist independently of our relationships with others that a person's humanity depends on the humanity of those around him. The relationality and intentional openness of the human being towards other beings is the key to the human social vocation itself. We don't find ourselves all the possibility to fulfil our deepest longing within ourselves, hence we need other beings for the sake of our own meaning and destiny. However, this approach towards others is not to be reduced into a solipsistic thinking that we want others for our own fulfilment from a utilitarian and pragmatic point of view, but on the other hand, others definitely open for us the vistas for our own flourishing. Human flourishing is permanently possible in and through other beings. This remains a preeminent fact not only of human solidarity rather the humanity in the humans.

Significantly, the social distancing imposed at the time of Covid-19 has put human being into a situation of suffocation from within. The choking of the human spirit was visible during this period of time. We cannot live as isolated entities, rather our intentional openness as transcendence towards the Other always demands a social transcendence from within. Covid-19 protocols of physical and social distancing has endangered human spirit in us to many unprecedented effects that led to the ruin of our inner psyche itself. A few contexts, or situations, I think, are inevitable in reading this situation with a philosopher's mind.

A most significant wake of realization by the virtue of the virus is that we are corporeal beings, beings in bodies. Butler writes,

As porous the body is neither pure boundary nor pure opening but a complex negotiation among the two, situated in a mode of living where breath, food, digestion, and well-being - for sexuality, intimacy, and the taking in each other's bodies - are all requirements (for oneself, of and by the world). We cannot really live without each other, without finding ourselves inside another's pores, or without letting another in. For that is what we live, outside of the bounded self and its conceits, as an opening toward the world.³

3 Butler, *What World is this? A Pandemic Phenomenology*, 108-109.

Each individual experience, in himself and in others, how a reality inseparable from the totality of the individual (the body, with its spatiality, temporality, sexuality), manifests and expresses the self. Only in extreme situations can there be a disassociation between the corporeal and mental-spiritual dimensions. This distinction partly reflects that made in German between *Körper* and *Leib*, as developed by Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler. *Körper* is the body considered objectively in its physicality, while *Leib* is one's own body as perceived by the individual in his subjectivity. With etymological roots in the German word for 'life' (*Leben*) and 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*), the lived body is not a physical object that can be studied from a perspective of scientific detachment, and, therefore, it is not to be understood as a thing or possession that I have. It refers, rather, to the first-person experiences, perceptions, and feelings of my own body. In this sense, I do not 'have' a body; as Gabriel Marcel writes, 'I am my body'

To say 'I am my body,' then, is to say that my thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and experiences are situated and perspectival; they are entwined in the world 'through the medium of my body' as Maurice Merleau-Ponty conceives it. On this account, there is no way to distinguish 'the world' from my 'experience of the world'. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an encapsulated object that exists mechanistically as 'parts extra parts', rather it refers to the feelings, perceptions, and movements of 'my own body' (*le corps propre*), the body that I am enacting and living through in my everyday life. From this perspective, my being does not end with my own skin, because it is already stretching into a shared world, weaving its way into familiar patterns of behaviour and recognizing the intentions, gestures, and expressions of others, and the threads of this embodied weave form an interconnected system. Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, explains that I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another. This experience and meditation upon our body and the bodies of others are interconnected and corporeal beings. Covid-19 experience brought us to this lived experience.

The vulnerability of the human existence is made more visible to us at the time of the pandemic. We are killed and affected by the virus without distinction, regardless of age, sex, even social conditions. The fragility of human existence was taken to its bare nudity where we are told loudly that we are truly mortal and nothing could stop us from death. Against the modern man's conception of his unstoppable drive for advancement and development pandemic tell

us, no scientific advancement in medicine and technology could give us any consolation to this existential undeniability of our vulnerable human condition as Martin Heidegger conceives in *Being and Time* human being as *Dasein* is a being-unto-death.

Covid-19 has brought in this crucial fact of the human existence, especially to the poor people all over the world, although the rich and the elite were not rightly exempted from the horror of existence itself. Notwithstanding, they had the consolation of economic wellbeing unlike the daily wage labor class folks who had to confine to the walls of their cells, or thatched houses without proper air and sanitation to miseries of poverty. They had no means for proper treatment and sometimes not even have had money enough to buy face masks to save themselves from being infected, for everyone were potential carriers of this virus that could kill us. The existential anxiety in the face of a meaningless reality of pandemic was so biting to one's existence as such. The world and human life remained horrible especially to the poor. Poverty is more strongly impacted by the external situation of social distancing to the poor who do not have houses of their own.

The philosopher Albert Camus in his novel *The Plague*, reflects deep on a Covid-19 like situation. The absurdity of human life is well reflected also in the *Myth of the Sisyphus*. The most common expressions by this existentialist thinker was indeed to explore the bare fact of human existence emphasizing the unavoidable existential condition. The existential fear and anxiety is the disorientation and confusion that disrupts all the promises of life. This leaves one with meaninglessness and sense of purposelessness in life. Life as absurd remained very true idea, nevertheless for Camus, the world or the human being is not in itself absurd, but rather absurdity appeared by juxtaposing the two due to the incompatibility between them. The madman in the *The Myth of Sisyphus* remains the symbol of the absurdity of existence by rolling the stone over to the top of the mountain for no reason and pushing it to the valley; so is the predicament of human existence in a world threatened by the feast of the evil in the pandemic. It unleashed its horrific powers by choking the life of a person.

The bio-power politics is another screaming reality where Michel Foucault's analysis is found today in public health management strategies for the treatment of coronavirus very significant. For Foucault bio-power⁴ refers

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Reissue Edition (New York: Vintage, 1990), 140.

to the practice of modern nation-states by an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations. It refers specifically to public health practices, among other regulatory mechanisms; and it controls people in large groups, through an anatomo-politics of the human body, and biopolitics of the population through social institutions of discipline. Power is codified in both social practices and human behavior, as the human subject gradually accepts subtle regulations and expectations of the social order.⁵ The governmental agencies tried to control the human population with measures and strategies that are inhuman. The fleeing of the other state workers in India and the rejection of medication and provisions to the marginalized and the oppressed were the darkest part of the pandemic situation that made human life impossible by the inhumanity of the one against the other man.

Certain disapproval of the 'wall' ideology must be practiced at the wake of post-Covid-19 age where everyone is responsible for each other. The acceptance of everyone and everything is related to each other speaks of the interconnectedness manifested in and through the virus epidemic is the virtue of the virus. The interpretations of Quantum mechanics also shed light into this unity underlying in all things that is also the wisdom of the East.⁶ We need to foster the idea that nothing is permanently separate from each other and everyone. Hence, no domination and dominion be possible without harming one another. In addition, the virtues of virus invite us to meditate on the most fundamental fact of human fragility. These reflections on the human and the pandemic can never leave us in a definitive platform of conclusion, for it invites us to rethink and reimagine the reality of life itself. Pandemic can only be to a certain extent and cannot be endemic; however, it should lead the humans into an awareness of a new life order against the backdrop of all the odd rhythms of life. Life ushers into its new ways in the post-Covid-19 age to a post-normal age where the new generations would find everything new in solidarity with the way of life as it unfolds. Life happens and it will continue to happen the way it leads to mysteries of untold life. The paradigm shift must also extend its impact on the global economy and sustainable development scenarios. The virtues of the virus can lead us to a new paradigm where we

5 Nicolae Sfetcu, "*COVID-19 Pandemic – Philosophical Approaches*," Set Things (November 10, 2020), Multi Media Publishing (2020), ISBN: 978-606-033-419-4, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31039.74405/1, URL = <https://www.telework.ro/en/e-books/covid-19-pandemic-philosophical-approaches/>.

6 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (United Kingdom: Harpercollins, 2007).

think of humanity not only in terms of progress but in terms of solidarity and communion, where every tiny virus do have a significance beyond all expectations and calculations.

II

Thinking the Human and the Pandemic is a fruitful commitment to the human in each of us. Holding high the values of humanity as the supreme goal of every mission, the task of this book is to think new ways and means for a better tomorrow in the post-normal period of time that befall us as the post-Corona-19 age. The different chapters in this book are various philosophical perspectives approached by thinkers who dedicated their time to think humanity and pandemic at the very pandemic days. Hence, the articles remain phenomenologically approached from various context of the very moment of the pandemic itself.

Joy Alumkal in his article 'Revisiting Epistemic Uncertainties in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic' deals with the epistemic uncertainties that has come into the Covid-19 situations. Epistemic uncertainty refers to the uncertainty generated by subjective, objective, intentional and unintentional variants that causes failure in right knowing and proper communicating of the reality of a situation and its expected outcome. Leaving aside the extreme meanings of scepticism, like solipsism or even Cartesian scepticism of perception, we base ourselves on 'naturalized epistemology' of science, which accepts the world and ourselves as real with biological and psychological limitations and strengths. Then we try to tackle the issues existing in our personal and social life context: at present, in the context of the pandemic Covid-19. Though the solutions of science, traditional religion and liberal spirituality are available, we propose an integration of the scientific and the liberal spiritual. Scientific, for our understanding of the ground in which we place ourselves and liberal spiritual for the ethical values of the interrelationships that make use of the psychological and biological strengths of the individuals and societies. Actually, this integration is the need of the times to tackle the 'evils' of both our own interior and the fragile global system to which a portent is the present repercussions of the pandemic Covid-19.

Jojo Varakulalayil through his article 'Rediscovering Touch in the Difficult Time of Covid' explores the possibility of the dynamics of touch in the context of covid-19. The article argues that we are at a Post-normal age, though not certainly, a time when our age-old ways of being about are any longer normally possible; and, thus, it remains a time beyond the normal time. The Pandemic

Covid-19 has brought us into a burning pitch where human life is threatened by being present to one another as each of us are the potential carriers of the corona virus. The widespread of corona virus have left us into a panicking situation of being distant to one another where carnal closeness is alarming. This paper analyses the meaning and possibility of touch during the pandemic as social distancing is a Covid-19 protocol. Even if, social media platforms have brought in social connectivity over the social distancing, it has neither assured us nearness nor an exit from human isolation. Aren't we facing the crisis of touch - our most vital sense - during the pandemic? Social distancing has amplified it both physically and morally. The more it is denied the more one wants it. This paper analyses the very understanding of touch as our most vital sense; then, it investigates on certain philosophical traditions of the body and touch; and, finally, it discusses the sense and meaning of touching beyond touch, thus to argue, how touch is significant far beyond the carnal dimension at the difficult times of the Pandemic.

Nishant Irudayadason in presenting 'Corona Virus and Bio-power -*Body as the Site of Control*' makes a reading of the Covid-19 from the management of the pandemic from the perspectives of body and bio-power. With numerous restrictions imposed on us, Foucault's analysis of bio-power seems to have seen the light of the day through many policies and programmes that effectively exercise control on people, which includes "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life." The paper analyses this control through three broad themes such as obsession with loss, deprivation of human touch and finally acceleration of bio-power.

In 'Political Economy of the Pandemic through Human Silhouettes' Jose Maliekal delves into the impact Coronavirus pandemic on society, through the optic of political economy. After the introductory remarks and placing the heuristic framework of political economy, with a Senonian slant, the work engages itself in the task of foregrounding the consequences of the human encounter with the pandemic, specifically under the aspects of politicization of the virus, communalization of the virus, the social murder of citizens by the state and the hidden play of capital behind the virus. True to its title, the work eschews itself from statistical jugglery and captures in broad strokes of human silhouettes, the plight of flesh and blood human beings, caught in the nexus between the state and the corporate giants, which have milked the cow of the Coronavirus, at the expense of the poor. The concluding remarks project a few futuristic proposals to tame the Leviathan of neo-liberal capitalism, the real villain behind the play of the virus.

In the article ‘Novel Coronavirus – a new Locus Cognitus of Philosophy’, Victor Ferrao argues that we cannot philosophize by bracketing coronavirus in the wake of great distress it has inflicted on humanity. Philosophers have the imperative to make the novel virus the new *locus classicus* for doing philosophy. The new *locus cognitus* of philosophy can indeed generate responsible, relevant and emancipative responses to the global pandemic and the havoc that it has inflicted on humanity. We raise this all important issue in this study and attempt to seek the *dharma* of philosophy in the wake of the lethal virus. This study is divided into three parts. The first part tries to broadly understand the impact as well as human response to the global pandemic. We stay largely within the boundaries of philosophy and do not take other important responses that are medical or scientific in this context. The second part of this study attempts to discover the *dharma* of philosophy in the light of global pandemic. The third part of the study tries to deepen the new *dharma* of philosophy and strives to suggest that the new mission of philosophy is to produce a hermeneutics of love that will in turn enable us to usher in what we may describe as civilizations of love.

Keith D’Souza in writing ‘Surviving Covid-19: From Alienation to ‘*New Normals*’ of Belonging’ reads into two movements that may characterize the phenomenon of Covid-19, namely, the dialectic or existential tension between alienation and belonging, and the hermeneutical spiral of normalcy-distanciation-‘new normalcy’. The dialectic or existential tension between alienation and belonging takes place at different levels or modes of human experience: personal, inter-personal, social, institutional, political, economic, etc. Within each of these modes of experience, we encounter both a sense of alienation and a sense of connection and belonging. The hermeneutical spiral from old to new ways of living begins with an initial rupture of pre- Covid-19 normal existence at various levels. If the circle or spiral—via the rigorous and crucible of multiple distanciations—gets completed, then new forms of normalcy are possible, at different levels, or in diverse areas of personal, social, institutional, economic and political life. Covid-19 is an invitation to humanity to redefine and reimagine human life. We are invited to transcend our normal ways of human living, relating and working, and to embrace new ways of being human. In a situation of flux, trans-normal ways of proceeding may seem novel for some time, and the human community may experiment with diverse forms of these new ways, till newer and more acceptable paradigms emerge and gain acceptance. Human beings are creatures of habit, and many new aspects of life will take on the form of ‘new normals’. It is

hoped that these 'new normal' aspects of human life harbor nourishing aspects of belonging, rather than alienation.

Sekar Sebastian in his article 'The Ethics of Care: A Christian Response to the Pandemic' argues for a new paradigm that is a need of the time as we are encountering a health crisis that is pandemic. Covid-19 as a pandemic reality does not see the place, people, time, caste, creed, profession, economic status and so on. Every pandemic crisis demands its unique understanding and various responses. It is a crisis that challenges our response in the way of our commitment to the care. As Christian philosophers in India, this article starts off by explaining the reality of the pandemic that may be a challenge and an opportunity to the morality and faith. Thus, we pay special attention to the ethics of care and our response to coronavirus pandemic. Further it explores the possibility of a new world order that seeks a more equal, compassionate and humane global order. It discovers and examines moral questions that arise out of a world that is broken and suffering, beset by devastation and yet called to live the faith responsibly and truthfully. Thus, the article puts forward some of the dilemmas wherein traditional faith and practices are confronted by the pandemic especially in areas like worship, the sacraments and understanding the value of technology in the practice of the faith with the importance of ethics of care.

John Peter in 'Medical Assessment of Covid-19: Philosophical Perspectives' makes a detailed analysis of the Pandemic medical scenario. Rightly called as pandemic, the outbreak of Covid-19 has left humanity of advanced sciences and of improved health care systems, feeling exhausted, uncertain, tired and worn out by the burden of measures in prevention and cure of the disease. Thoroughly wounded in the fight against the virus, human beings are yet hopeful to find a way forward although the human cost of the crisis has been so high. The efforts for perseverance and constant monitoring of the grim situation in medical and health care facilities are on the verge of exhaustion and collapse. The current human tragedy has unfolded many anthropological questions and reflections. The paper attempts to spell out few philosophical perspectives by speaking of the scientific knowledge about the virus and by enumerating the medical interventions of the pandemic crisis.

The article 'Covid-19: Revisiting Science, Spirituality and Humanity' Stephan Jayard masterfully argues that the pandemic of Covid-19 has shaken, and is still shaking, the whole world. Besides the loss of lives of millions, innumerable people have been severely affected by it. The pandemic-virus,

about which the world of science is not sure whether it is living or non-living, has yet taught us several lessons, those who are still living. We are forced to change our lifestyles, to change how we treat one another, how we look at nature and deal with our environment, how we learn and teach, how we understand religion and spirituality, and how we value values and valuables. This article looks at the whole scenario of Covid-19 as a clarion call to revisit our notions of Science, Spirituality and Humanity at large. Neither unrealistic hopes for science, nor hostility to science, really helps to achieve total welfare of humanity. Spirituality must not be confused with religion, though religion can be its source. Genuine spirituality will not give in to sectarianism and racism. Humanity, as a whole, cannot survive unless it learns to collaborate for collective and holistic living. Though the world has lost many things due to the pandemic, yet it stands to learn a lot from it.

George Panthamackel in 'Egoity and Alterity During the Pandemic' makes a sense and meaning of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas exploring the ethical possibility at the time of pandemic. Covid-19 has affected millions of peoples with far-reaching consequences on healthcare, economic and social situation. The people's response to the pandemic has largely been either 'egoitic' (self-centred), or 'alteritic' (other-centred). Levinas popularized the concept, 'alterity,' which is the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation. Despite his insistence upon the absolute character of transcendence of the Other, Levinas admits of a proximity of the Other in the 'face.' The alterity is the radical heterogeneity of the other. The face brings with it a trace of the infinity that we cannot know directly and fully. The Other person is irreducible to my experience of him/her, and so never present or co-present with me. Responsibility, as an order or command that I receive, does not originate with me, rather precedes me. It commands me to help the poor and needy. In order to help the poor people in this situation of crisis caused by the pandemic, for example, the Catholic Church in India, already on April 23, 2020, reached out to the poor affected by lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and was helping the affected people as best as she could. As many moved with genuine love and compassion for others, egos moved to serve the 'alters', there are also many persons who exploited the crisis for their selfish advantage, using alters (others) to serve egos.

Kuruvilla Pandikattu through 'Denying Covid Vaccine and Climate Change: Lessons for Our Survival and Flourishing' presents an interesting and detailed case studies of those who deny Covid-19 and the vaccine, in spite of 4.92 million documented death, calls for a special study. This article documents

some well-known persons who deny Covid-19 as well as its vaccine. Then, we relate them to climate change (global warming), deniers and those who ignore the human-induced Anthropocene and Sixth Mass Extinction. Both of them seem to have similar psychological and philosophical inclinations. Further, we look into some of the philosophical and psychological reasons that can help us understand their need to deny these terrific realities of life. Finally, we plead to recognise the reality around us (including scientific data and religious experiences), so that together we can enable a sustainable world order.

Francis Arackal in 'Covid-19 Experience and Media' uncovers the involvement media during the pandemic and argues that Covid-19 struck almost the entire humanity with so many theories floating around regarding its origin and causes, without any definite information about the same. It's the media that brought to global attention the lightning-like speed and spread of the virus. In this article we look at the positive and negative influence of the media in reporting various aspects of the Covid pandemic – how the media responded in alleviating the miseries of the people by providing proper and timely information; how it acted as an agency of the government, non-governmental organizations in framing helpful policies; how at times media acted as a vehicle of rumour mongering, misinformation, spread of fear; how it colluded with big and powerful pharmaceutical companies in furthering their business interests; how it almost acted as a lapdog and not a watch dog (which supposed to be its role) in hiding and distorting facts and data to suit the government agenda; how it acted as a tool of government's false propaganda and so forth.

Finally, Pushparajan with his lived wisdom in 'The imperative of 'Ecosophy' echoes in the Pandemic Covid-19' calls for a radical *metanoia* for our environment in which we inhabit. This approach shall be effected not from the traditional technological and anthropological version of reality as human centered, rather our gravest concern is the preservation of the habitat for the future of our generations and thus respecting nature. In this regard, this article makes an attempt at presenting the ecological crisis in order to elucidate it for the meaning of neologisms 'ecosophy' and thereby arguing for an ecological concern. That realization in turn impel us to appreciate the hues of the echoes as the perversions of modern civilization, and in turn, it should lead us to be seriously be committed to the pursuit of the 'ecological imperative' especially within the context of the pandemic. This can supply us with lessons drawn

from the terrific and tragic experience of the pandemic covid-19 with future vision of humanity with its bio-diversity.

III

Expressing words of gratitude as I conclude this editorial introduction that pays homage to those human others, I remain grateful to everyone who dared to think the human and the pandemic. It was, indeed, a difficult time where each of us remained uncertain about the unknown days ahead as we discussed, shared, and engaged in online dialogues on this uncanny and life threatening experience of the pandemic. All those contributed by writing these chapters dared to think the human and the pandemic that constitutes the content of this work. This work, unlike many of our academic papers, does have something very special to offer to the memory of this darkest period of our life history. ACPI Executive Committee is to be accorded and appreciated for this noble task of thinking the human and the pandemic as a collective commitment. Gratefully remembering Keith D'Souza, SJ, the former President of ACPI for his tireless efforts to arrange the online meetings at the very pandemic lived days. Not only as philosophers, but also, all the more as genuine human beings, our efforts to think together left us with the hopeful humanity. Special thanks to the ACPI Executive Committee for entrusting the task of editing this work and I specially thank John Peter Vallabadoss Ofm Cap., the President of ACPI for his fraternal ways of being with me. Acknowledging, kindly, the Asian Trading Corporation, Bengaluru, the publishers for the continued support to ACPI by publishing our work. Let our humanness in us allow us to be the guardians of the humanity in each one!

"I love mankind", he said, "but I find to my amazement that the more I love mankind as a whole, the less I love man in particular."

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Revisiting Epistemic Uncertainties in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic

Joy Alumkal, OCD

Abstract:

Epistemic uncertainty refers to the uncertainty generated by subjective, objective, intentional and unintentional variants that causes failure in right knowing and proper communicating of the reality of a situation and its expected outcome. Leaving aside the extreme meanings of scepticism, like solipsism or even Cartesian scepticism of perception, we base ourselves on 'naturalized epistemology' of science, which accepts the world and ourselves as real with biological and psychological limitations and strengths. Then we try to tackle the issues existing in our personal and social life context: at present, in the context of the pandemic Covid-19. Though the solutions of science, traditional religion and liberal spirituality are available, we propose an integration of the scientific and the liberal spiritual. Scientific for our understanding of the ground in which we place ourselves and liberal spiritual for the ethical values of the interrelationships that make use of the psychological and biological strengths of the individuals and societies. Actually, this integration is the need of the times to tackle the 'evils' of both our own interior and the fragile global system to which a portent is the present repercussions of the pandemic Covid-19.

Keywords: *Scepticism, solipsism, epistemic, science, traditionalist, ethics.*

Introduction

I begin by exposing a fundamental issue that both science and philosophy struggle to clarify but still unresolved. It is expressed in a comic presentation in the context of the vaccine experiment. The first part of this article, the scientific method used in vaccine experiment, is exposed. That method has space for 'regular' uncertainty. In the second part a presentation of two new variants are exposed in the form of 'George the data manager' who unintentionally tampers

the data because of his whims and fancies or prejudices; and ‘Evangeline the intentional adulterator’ who tamper stored doses! The title says, even if we are 100 percentage sure that Evangeline, the adulterator, did not tamper with our stored doses, the whims of George the data manager is uncertain!¹ These variants exposed as factors in knowing shows us epistemic uncertainty. This paper is an exposition of the complexity of these two (unintentional, intentional, subjective and objective) variants in knowing, especially in the context of the repercussions of the Pandemic Covid-19.

1 Some Epistemic Uncertainty Generating Incidents to Ponder on

Several events in the 20th and 21st century triggered international, national, communitarian or individualepistemic uncertainty. Most vital are the poorly managed political events. The most egregious example being the 1914 assassination of a European political heir which triggered World War I, and the poor political decisions in its aftermath (such as the Treaty of Versailles) triggered the much more horrific World War II. This was followed by the mega epistemic uncertainties that made the West and USSR suspicious of each other. The over-fearful reaction to Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 resulted in the arming of Pakistan and Taliban, the consequences of which created a new epistemic uncertainty: how to deal with Islam. Decades long uncertainty on this has resulted in the extremely complex phenomenon of inter-religious and inter-civilizational suspicion.

Look at the financial and economic decisions by powerful financial cartels and other decision makers causing financial catastrophes in financial sector, which then percolated down, bankrupting companies and even nations, let alone job losses and its repercussions even in the study of students. The collapses of ‘too-big-to-fail’ banks and bankruptingeven countries are examples. Sometimes powerful politicians, with good intentions may make overnight decisions on incorrect advice. A true example to this case could be demonetization in India. The life of all people of India were affected negatively by the repercussions of the declaration of overnight demonetization of the currency notes by Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India on November 8, 2016.

Then there are natural calamities and epistemic uncertainties they produce: Look at the repercussions of the unexpected floods that brought to those

1 The two variants exposed are intrinsic limitation of knowledge. First is the whims and fancies of the one who generate knowledge and the second is intentional adulteration. (Ref. https://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php?title=2440:_Epistemic_Uncertainty, March 22, 2021).

directly affected by it—such as in Kerala in 2019, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra etc., in 2020. The lives and expectations of people living in the flood affected areas underwent immediate and dramatic changes, which took months and years to overcome. Catastrophes like wild fire and flood etc., only have local repercussions. Demonetization has national repercussions. Financial and international political decisions have international repercussions. Mega incidents that affect worldwide in a short period of time are extremely rare. We have been living through one — the Covid-19 pandemic, probably the fastest spread calamity in the history of humanity.²

Within months of the news about Covid-19 spreading, suddenly life became uncertain for many: who can be trusted? Even a gurgling baby could be dangerous now! If we hold it, would we live or die? Covid-19 brought out the self-preserving instincts of individuals. Doors remained shut in the face of a parent, spouse, sibling, relation or friend returning from a supposedly Covid-19 infected land.

Doubt became so ubiquitous that whether we will be living tomorrow becomes uncertain; whether those around us will be there or not too becomes uncertain! There is no way to know for sure, even if, we know something, we are not sure about the veracity of what we know. We are unable to do anything that substantially change the situation! Life immediately is turned into a chaos with flood of information from those learned and those hoaxes; those well-intentioned lies, fear mongering, mass hysterias and dooms-day-is-here behaviours. With the lockdowns, we were banned from socialising and going out of home. If we were affected by Covid-19, then our mobility is limited

2 There are differing opinions about the uncertainties created by incidents we presented. Take the example of the analysis of Pandemic of Covid 19 by Nassim Taleb, the author of the book *The Black Swans: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. In his opinion, a rare event which has complex intentional and unintentional repercussions with uncertain consequences can be called a black swan (The concept of the black swans come from the European premise of the medieval times that 'there are no black swans'. It was true till certain European explorers reached Australia in 1696 where they saw first time black swans existing! It was a wonder to them and they had to change the existing premise that there are no black swans from their text books). In one of his interviews the interviewer Bernard Avishai asked him, can we call the present pandemic a black swan, he answered in the negative. Because he was of the opinion that the issue of viruses was always in the priority of the planning of the nations. But the governments messed up everything and turned it into an uncontrolled pandemic. Actually, it was an issue that could have contained in the beginning. (Ref. Bernard Avishai, "Portent of a More Fragile Global System," in *The New Yorker*, April 21, 2020 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-pandemic-isnt-a-black-swan-but-a-portent-of-a-more-fragile-global-system>).

into our room. It is like we are reduced into ourselves. Both time wise and space wise humans are reduced by the pandemic. But this reduction, in time and space, opened our inside, be it head or heart or both: our psychological, intellectual and spiritual ‘demons’ got opened like a pandora’s box. How shall we understand the repercussions of the extend of this ‘external’ reduction and opening of inside demons?³ In this case we expose the historical aspect of such uncertainty.

2 Epistemic Uncertainty: A Historical Exposition

Our ordinary life functions on assumptions. Most of them we received from traditions and our own experiences based on ‘patternicity’ and ‘agenticity’.⁴ Usually, we do not question those assumptions. We take them for granted as true. But as humans belong to the human community that always have ‘sparks’, ‘wonders’, ‘doubts’ and ‘questions’, we turn sceptical about certain assumptions and raise questions. All through human history we learn it.

The Greek word ‘*skeptikos*’ means ‘an inquirer’, someone who is unsatisfied with what is assumed to be known and persistently seeks truth. Throughout history we find sceptics developing arguments to undermine the contentions (theories) that turned into axiomatic beliefs of dogmatic philosophers, theologians and scientists. Eastern philosophy had a strong tradition of scepticism, exemplified by the Buddha’s *Kalama Sutta* where he cautions his students about accepting anything including his teachings without testing them in practice.⁵ Similarly, the *Upanishads* follow a path of examining an artifact generated by thought, understanding its nature and rejecting it as *neti, neti* (not this, not this).⁶

If we look into the history of scepticism in the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary periods, we get the complexity of the issues connected with epistemology. One fundamental question is about the very possibility of ‘knowledge’; and the second is about the validity of the so called ‘knowledge’

3 This is only one side of the story. We present here the opening of the demons of our heart. In the third section we will return back to the angels of our heart that make us sacrifice our time, money and ability for the general good.

4 See. These words are from Michael Shermer, from his book *The Believing Brain* (2011). A summary of the book under the title *The Believing Brain: Notes & Review*, by Lucio Buffalmano is available at the website www.thepowermoves.com.

5 See. "Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas" (AN 3.65), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>.

6 See. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/neti-neti>.

we received. This second question is the issue we tackle here in this essay - the one that probes the truthfulness or falsity of the content of the accumulated knowledge of humanity, which can sometimes be contrary or contradictory.

Socrates, who is hailed as the father of Western philosophy used to ask questions. When we analyse those questions, we see, they were raised to make the hearers aware of their conceptual confusions. His style was to clarify meaning of oft-used words - like piety, virtue, justice, knowledge etc., - so that they were defined accurately. Once both speaker and the listener clearly understood and agreed on the precise meaning of such non-concrete concepts, would they be ready to investigate philosophical and moral questions such as 'Can virtue be taught?' or 'Is justice good in itself or a means to something else?' or 'What would a completely just state look like?' Answering these questions meant grasping the essence of fundamental concepts and that meant having rigorous definitions and using language in precise ways.

Aristotle adds linguistic precision to the Socratic method and gives clear exposition of the fundamental assumptions that cannot be questioned behind the rational process of knowledge generation and the pitfalls in this process, both formal and material.⁷ Leaving the issues raised by the fundamental assumptions, there are possibilities of fallacious arguments. Aristotle exposed some, yet today, we see in our everyday life especially in the debates and arguments as tools of rhetoric. If we observe the political, cultural and religious debates on the media, most of them are designed to increase viewership (on the basis of which television channels and YouTube videos get their ratings and advertisement revenues) and we can notice logical fallacies such as proposing false statements designed to weaken the argument by distorting an issue, drawing false conclusions, misusing evidence or misusing language.

7 Aristotle's fundamental assumptions, known as the 'laws of thought' are: the law of identity (A is A), the law of contradiction (A cannot be both B and not B), and the law of excluded middle (A is either B or not B). The German polymath Leibniz (1646–1716) added one more: the law of sufficient reason (also known as law of causation or law of uniformity of nature), which insists that everything must have a reason or cause. It is an interesting question to ask: How shall we overcome the uncertainties that those who question these assumptions place before us? Philosophically when we look at them, how can A be A is a question, for one is the subjective use and the other is predicative use! They need to be related. Every relation presupposes twoness! If two there are differences! At least there are possibilities of writing first A in black ink or in capital letter and second A in another ink and small letter! In that case too they are not identical! The same can be said about law of excluded middle which says there is no middle position between truth and falsity. But Indian philosophical theories like seven nayas in Jainism, Catuskoti of Madhyamika and even Sat, asat anirvachaniya of Advaita reject this excluded middle. In the West the position of all pluralists, Hegelian dialectics etc., stand against this excluded middle. The same type of questions raised against Leibniz's law of causation by quantum physicists.

We understand that most of the time these technics are used to twist the issue in favour of one's arguments, without consciously aware of the fallacies involved in the arguments.⁸ This is understandable as the listeners are seeking punchlines and "clever comebacks," and assertions that support popular biases. Thus, media debates - and even some academic debates - tend to have fallacies such as *ad populum*, slippery slope, strawman, *ad-hominem* etc.⁹

Philosophical and scientific field are such that every foundation proposed by so called masters were doubted and questioned, during their time itself, or after by those who critically look at them. Broadly, we can call them sceptics at least in the context of their questioning. Plato's fundamental vision of reality was questioned by Aristotle. Aristotle is questioned and still this questioning is going on. Scholastics were questioned and Modernist secularisms dawned. Cartesians were questioned and new positivisms developed. Enlightenment initiated by Immanuel Kant, Hegel etc., were challenged and postmodernisms came up.¹⁰ This doubting of theories proposed by peers, or those lived before is very evident in the scientific field. Theories proposed by Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus and Johannes Kepler were challenged. Each challenge led to new attempts to resolve the sceptical difficulties.¹¹

8 Here we refer to the unconscious factors like emotions, desires that generate confirmation bias and narrative fallacy in our everyday judgements. This is scientifically proved through the ground breaking study of Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), through his exposition of the two fictitious characters in our brains: System 1 and System 2 operating systems. This line of an exposition we see in the studies of many other psychologists and neurologists who searched to the roots of uncertainty in the brains (See. Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swans: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, chapter 6, The Narrative Fallacy).

9 The logical fallacies like *ad hominum* (attacking the person who made the argument instead of the argument, straw man (first distort or oversimplify the argument of the opponent and then attack that distortion or oversimplification), slippery slope (claiming that this event will cause such a lot of chain of future events), *post hoc propter ergo hoc* (causal relationship is assumed from simple presence or association of two things like dance of a peacock and rain), persuasive arguments etc., are very common in our social-political-religious and cultural life.

10 If we analyse the post-modernist critique of modernists especially Immanuel Kant, we see the very '*numena*' is denied of its objective existence by presenting it as a construct of the mind, culture, religion etc. Thus, for the post-modernist, the uncertainty is not only epistemic, but also metaphysical. It means, they fall into the trap of questioning the foundations of ontology too along with epistemology! The issue was the issue of a 'wall' between the subjective uncertainty and the objective reality earlier, now it become an issue of subjective uncertainty and objective uncertainty. The issue we face is how to 'bridge' them!

11 Recent studies on different arias of Quantum physics, quantum chemistry etc., are the best examples of this.

2.1 Sceptical Arguments of Postmodernism

Let us face the questions raised by the latest radical form of scepticism known as post-modernism. The question raised by post-modernism can be formulated as: whether there can be any rational, objective framework for discussion of intellectual problems, or are the intellectual frameworks inherently determined by the life situation of each individual or culture? Postmodernism, with the help of various psychological approaches, literary criticisms, and lately boosted with experimental evidence from neuroscience, suggests that the validity, or truthfulness of any kind of human investigation, be it of philosophy, science etc., is not in itself based on any transcendent standard of truth, or falsehood, but judged in terms of their roles in the investigators' life experiences and expectations, or effects on human societies. Postmodernists try to prove their assertion by citing the works of certain relativist psychologists, neurologists and works of sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman.¹² These psychologists and sociologists show how our intellectual framework vary according to sexual orientation, race, gender and other features of human identity on one hand and on the other our present society's characteristic of 'liquid modernity'.¹³ The conclusion they reach is that there is no objective standpoint (some transcendent standard of truth or falsehood) from which to compare or evaluate these different points of views presented by philosophies or sciences.¹⁴

12 Post-modernist approaches of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to his social analysis attract the attention of many. He coins the word 'liquid modernity' to refer to our period. The term 'liquid society' to refer to the Western society of our times. He uses the word 'liquid fears' to refer to certain characteristics of our times. He claims that "we desire and seek a realization that usually consists of a constant becoming, in a permanent disposition of becoming". He reaches up to a position where our aim is not the object of our longing but the action of longing itself, in which we can find complete satisfaction.

13 The idea of liquid modernity as proposed by Zygmunt Bauman centres on certain characteristics of individuals, namely, increasing feelings of uncertainty and the privatization of ambivalence. It is a kind of chaotic continuation of modernity, where a person can shift from one social position to another in a fluid manner. Nomadism becomes a general trait of the "liquid modern" person as she or he flows through her or his own life like a tourist, changing places, jobs, spouses, values, and sometimes more—such as political or sexual orientation—excluding her or himself from traditional networks of support, while also freeing her or himself from the restrictions or requirements those networks impose.

14 To explain this fact, we use the paradigm of Thomas Kuhn from his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He uses the concepts of 'paradigm' and 'paradigm shift' to explain complexity of understanding the history of science and scientists. Exactly in the same way we can apply it on history of religion or history of philosophy and philosophers. In his opinion the group branded as 'scientists', like 'religious' start with a 'set of received beliefs' to practice their trade! This set of beliefs with which they begin their 'scientific

Sceptics of all times raised two-fold arguments and they can be presented as: if we base ourselves on certain criteria to prove something, we must first investigate that criterion. It would turn out that this criterion needs some other criteria to establish it etc., thus, risking the fallacy of *ad infinitum*. On the other hand, if we take the criterion as the criterion of itself, we succumb to the fallacy of circular argument. If we accept the logical blocks here, we also will have to agree to the Pyrrhonian scepticism of Sextus Empiricus (3rd cent CE), or that of his modern counterpart Benson Mates (1919–2009) that human beings cannot make any justifiable assertions about anything other than their own sense experiences.¹⁵ By the end of 20th century and in the 21st century, important contributions to epistemology were made by researchers in neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence, and computer science. Those investigations produced insights into the nature of vision, the formation of mental representations of the external world, and the storage and retrieval of information in memory, among many other processes. The new approaches, in effect, revived theories of indirect perception that emphasised the subjective experience of the observer.

Let us take the example of the optical illusions. In 1915 William Ely Hill published in the American humour magazine Puck a picture titled “My wife and my mother -in-law” with description that they are both in the same picture and challenging the reader to find them. In 1930 Edwin Boring published a study on the underlying phenomenon in the American Journal of Psychology under the title “A new ambiguous figure”. Later many returned back to the study of this phenomenon empirically. In one recent intercultural perceptual-conceptual experiment, studies of this reversible image made on

activity’ he calls a ‘paradigm’. In more precise words “the set of scientific and metaphysical beliefs that make up a theoretical framework within which scientific theories can be tested, evaluated and if necessary revised” is a paradigm. A paradigm shift is a shift in professional commitments to shared assumptions which happens when an anomaly “subverts the existing tradition of scientific practice”. These are the tradition shattering complements to the tradition bound activity of normal science. Then both the previous and the new will go on parallelly influencing many in the vast and complex society in which we live. (Joy A. P., *Science and Buddhism: Philosophizing from our historical context*, in *Philosophizing Science: Promises, Perils and Possibilities*, ed. Joy A. P., (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), 44-45.

- 15 Benson Mates claims “ultimately the only basis I can have for a claim to know that there exists something other than my own perceptions is the nature of those very perceptions. But they could be just as they are even if there did not exist anything else. Ergo, I have no basis for the knowledge-claim in question” (Ref. Avrum Stroll, “Epistemology” (Scepticism, Later Analytic Epistemology), in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology> Phenomenalism #ref247832).

a group of persons young and old presented their result. The age group of the seniors saw senior lady in the picture and youngsters saw young girl in the picture. The conclusion the psychologists gave about this fact is that the perspective shifting, that comes with age difference, culture change etc., can fundamentally alter how we evaluate evidence.¹⁶

Some findings of the neurologists support this type of the evaluation of the psychologists. They place once again even the efforts of the common-sense theorists to overcome issues of sense-data in perception at doubt. The neurologist Richard Gregory (1923–2010), for example, argued in 1993 that no theory of direct perception for certainty are certain. Neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran (1951–) showed that the stimulation of certain areas of the brain in normal people produces sensations comparable to those felt in so-called “phantom limb” phenomena (where an amputee experiences pains and other sensations “emanating” from a missing limb) and even out-of-body experiences. Ramachandran and his team used the now-famous “rubber hand” illusion to cure phantom limb pain in sufferers. This simple method did not require invasive equipment in the brain, but merely a box in which a rubber hand is placed. The person is asked to stroke the rubber hand, which soon takes on the role of the missing limb. In case of non-amputees, they will feel sensations in their real corresponding hand. In the experiments of Ramachandran and his colleagues the supporters of analytic epistemology see a modern variation of Descartes’s “evil genius” hypothesis: that we can never be certain that the sensations we experience accurately reflect an external reality.¹⁷

3 Proposed Solutions to the Postmodernist Scepticism

To accommodate the emerging scientific data, we need to re-examine proposed solutions to the perennial challenges of epistemic uncertainty by

16 I suggest some of the findings Jonathan Schooler from the University of California, Santa Barbara UCSB · Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences presents in his essays. It is available in his website <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jonathan-Schooler>, especially those like Jonathan Schooler, Stephen Baumgart, Michael Franklin, “Entertaining without endorsing: The case for the scientific investigation of anomalous cognition,” Mar 2018, Franklin M, Baumgart SL and Schooler J(2014) Future directions in precognition research: More research can bridge the gap between skeptics and proponents. *Front. Psychol.* 5:907. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00907. https://labs.psych.ucsb.edu/schooler/jonathan/sites/labs.psych.ucsb.edu.schooler.jonathan/files/pubs/1_frontiers-2.pdf.

17 Ted talk is available in the net by Vilayannur Ramachandran about this. Also Ref. Averum Scroll, “Epistemology”, (section on Later Analytic Epistemology), in *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, Available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology/Phenomenalism#ref247832>.

the contemporary secularisation theorists and their critics. Contemporary answers: post-postmodern, post-scientific, post-reformation, post-enlightenment, post-secular, and post two world wars, can be grouped largely into three types: scientific, fundamentally religious and liberally spiritual.¹⁸ All the three answers incorporate elements from the complex and mutually interactive context of our times—social, economic, political, cultural, moral and religious. Meanwhile, these answers also attempt to do justice to the latest findings from the natural and social sciences. Thus, all the answers have their philosophical (both theistic and atheistic) presuppositions, which, in turn, have their individual and communitarian repercussions.

Contemporary science's solutions are empirical, perceptual, rational and practical. It can be condensed into an acceptance of two types of uncertainty: the 'ordinary uncertainty,' which is scientifically accountable; and the 'epistemic uncertainty' which incorporate subjective factors, and, hence more amorphous.¹⁹ In their understanding, the real issue springs from the human tendency to over-interpret and our predilections for compact "meaningful" stories over raw truths. Nassim Taleb in his book *The Black Swans: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (chapter 6, 'The Narrative Fallacy,') explains it with concepts like confirmation bias and narrative fallacy. Michael Shermer explains it with concepts like 'patternicity' and 'agentivity'.²⁰ Against these tendencies of our mind, which comes from subjective first-person perspective of experience, science uses rigorous scientific methods that gives objective third-person perspective to science (behavioural tasks, neuro imaging etc).²¹

Experts such as Taleb, Shermer, etc., are scientific experts, who offer rational and secular interpretations of the world. The solution they propose is to free data collectors and scientists from all political, religious and popular

18 Though I present the possible answers in three categories, what I prefer as the best is an integration of the scientific and spiritual. I shall develop it in the context of my analysis of the pandemic covid 19 in this section.

19 On this point I take up the article of Jonathan Schooler published in Open MIND. (Ref. Schooler, J. (2015). "Bridging the Objective/Subjective Divide - Towards a Meta-Perspective of Science and Experience", in T. Metzinger & J. M. Windt (Eds). Open MIND: 34(T). Frankfurt: MIND Group. doi: 10.15502/9783958570405. Available at <https://open-mind.net/papers/bridging-the-objective-subjective-divide...%C2%A0%C2%B7%20PDF%20file>).

20 Both these authors through their books try to explain the brain's pattern seeking nature. Human mind, when aware hindsight, though the full chain of events, often succumbs to the temptation to assign exaggerated importance to the original black-swan event.

21 See. https://www.cmc-ia.org/icm2018amsterdam/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Wed9.00_A.-Bernstein-Integrating-First-Person-and-Third-Person-Perspectives.pdf.

interference. They also propose to restructure the inter-institutional links that connect scientific data production institutions with generalist-led, public policy-making institutions headed by politicians and bureaucrats. It should be possible to clearly convey simplified, but not simplistic truth to the political decision makers and the public. This, they insist, is the only way to reduce fragility in the face of uncertainties that these 'black swans' create. The inter-governmental United Nations Organisation with its special agencies aim to tackle the international issues from this angle.²²

The current critics of the secular and rational interpretations offer problem identification and their solutions from two perspectives — traditionalist and anti-traditionalist. Both groups make use of sceptical arguments.²³ The traditionalists tend to mistrust all rational and scientific 'artifacts' and recommend that humans must abandon rational activities and turn fully to faith and revelation as prescribed in scriptures of various religions, and thus, follow only our conscience - which too being determined by the teachings - without any other criterion for determining the truth. Their answer is simple and easily conveyable to the public: return back to the 'spirit of the tradition' in our times.²⁴ In this process, they tend to dismiss the knowledge and experience accumulated that are not supported by the scriptures. Often dismissed by such fundamentalist approach are democracy and its ability to modify laws according to changing circumstances.²⁵

The other group takes a more balanced view respecting the spirit of the religion that they call mysticism or spirituality. On the one hand they take seriously the 'Heideggerian turn' with its cognisance of the 'inherently world-bound' nature of humans; the socio-cultural environment and the

22 This doesn't mean that they are totally ignoring the ethical values or the spiritual or contemplative eye to look at the world issues. Later we will present the United Nations official solution as the model for ideal integration of the scientific and spiritual which is the best solution for the issues we face.

23 The use of scepticism in the scientific perspective and scepticism used in the fundamentalist religious perspective and liberal spiritual perspective are both content different and emphasis different.

24 The temperament of this position we see in the words of all the proponents of the institutionalised teachings of all the traditional religions. For them solution to all social problems of our time are in the spirit of the religion that they believe.

25 Some Islamic leaders unequivocally demands humans to follow 'eternal and unchangeable God's laws' as prescribed by their revealed scripture, and shun all other 'manmade laws' other than what they made based on their scripture! This is an example of fundamentalist religious position.

practical-communal nature of cognition.²⁶ On the other hand, they also take seriously 'post-death of God', 'post-death of human' reflections. They tend to recommend a 'Religion without religions', 'God without gods', 'spirituality without institutional religions' as the solution to all the ailments of the contemporary societies.²⁷

4 Integral Solution to the Epistemic Uncertainty During Covid 19 Pandemic

In the opinion of the socio-political philosopher Charles Taylor, the classification of the scientific, or secular and religious or spiritual is the fruit of a modern and postmodern selfhood which is increasingly based on a modern secular worldview. In this view, gods, demons, and cosmic forces are reduced to superstition. This rationalist-scientific views and the solutions they offer took birth in opposition to the 'sacramental worldview' of the pre-modern selfhood, where the reality understood in two realms of the ultimate and the empirical. In the sacramental worldview, the metaphysical and epistemic aspects of the ultimate reality understood as existing independent of and beyond the

26 Heideggerian turn refers to recognition of the mistake of the paradigm of philosophical knowledge that is theoretical and individual against the practical and communal coming from the sociocultural environment. This is his *Dasein*. Heidegger's *Dasein* is a revolt against the metaphysicalization or the theoretical philosophization. He called for a 'human in the world' context for any analysis. "In Heidegger's approach, all transcendental reductions are abandoned. What he claimed to discover is that human beings are inherently world-bound. The world does not need to be derived; it is presupposed by human experience. In their prereflective experience, humans inhabit a sociocultural environment in which the primordial kind of cognition is practical and communal, not theoretical or individual ("egoistic"). Human beings interact with the things of their everyday world (*Lebenswelt* (life-world)) as a workman interacts with his tools; they hardly ever approach the world as a philosopher or scientist would. The theoretical knowledge of a philosopher is a derivative and specialized form of cognition, and the major mistake of epistemology from Descartes to Kant to Husserl was to treat philosophical knowledge as a paradigm of all knowledge. (Ref. A.P. Martinich, "Contemporary Philosophy," available at <https://universalium.en-academic.com/110605/epistemology>).

27 This is the position of those who critically look at traditional religions and institutions, especially of those who take seriously the questions raised against religions. At the same time, they keep close to their heart the spirituality and mysticism. Some of them go to that extend of mixing different mysticisms in their position and on the uncertainties that traditional religion causes. (Ref. Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 2007; John D Caputo (born October 26, 1940), *On Religion; After the Death of God* are investigations into the religion without religion of Jacques Derrida; the 'theological turn' taken in recent French phenomenology by Jean-Luc Marion and others; the critique of ontotheology; the dialogue of contemporary philosophy with Augustine of Hippo and Paul of Tarsus; and medieval metaphysics and mysticism; Swart, S. (2021). *Twenty-First Century Faith*, Academia Letters, Article 1562. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL1562>).

cognitive mind's limited ability to perceive.²⁸ As science brought more and more clarity in epistemic issues and liberal spiritual, or mysticism left behind some of the controversial aspects of religion, a chance for integration came up where the needs of both being scientific and being mystic or 'transcending' are catered.

Every issue that comes up affecting our life, whether in our personality, in the psychological, biological, intellectual, spiritual realm, or at the family level, community level, intercultural level within the community, national level or international level interactions, has complex repercussions in our personal and social relation context. Since, the issues are complex, the solutions, too, are complex. From this context, we reduce further the three perspectives into one integral perspective that is the fruit of the integration of Science and Spirituality. We use this perspective to tackle the issues generated in connection with pandemic of Covid-19.²⁹

5 A Retrospective Look for Understanding the Effects of Epistemic Uncertainty

The Pandemic Covid-19 is tackled in the world stage, nationally, locally, at family level, and individually. Since, we have a history of one and a half years of tackling the pandemic before us, we can look back into its nature and repercussions from different angles. Practically speaking, pandemic is a blanket term given to a whole set of complex situations, including so many crises within the main visible crisis of containing the spread of the virus in the society which is a medical emergency. The sub crises that come out as from the Pandora box of the pandemic are the social, economic, political, cultural, spiritual and psychological impacts of it both in the individual and community context. We need a lot of patience and humility to listen to all these angles of it.

28 In his book *Secular Age*, Charles Taylor wanted to enquire the possibility of integration in our age for a person who wants both secular values that centre on this world and at the same time wanted spirituality or mysticism. This issue was taken forward by many other thinkers. (See. Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 2007; Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, Craig Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 2013).

29 The *raison d'être* for our further integration is the sceptical questions raised against our brain's ability, mind's ability and sense's ability. Even Quantum physicists are involved in questions connected with limits of understanding with experiments like the Chinese room experiment, where the result has repercussions on study of consciousness. The conceptions of competence without comprehension in many of our activities as Daniel Dennet explains in his book *From Bacteria to Back and Back: the Evolution of Minds* stands as true in many cases. (Ref. John Horgan, "Quantum Mechanics, the Chinese Room Experiment and Limits of Understanding," in *Scientific American*, March 9, 2021).

6 Methodology for Tracing Covid-19 Issues

One can trace the history of the pandemic by discovering its initial outbreak moment and slowly reach up to the 'successful containing' of it by the authorities all over the world. In between the two, there are so many stages and so many stakeholders. If we take an example from the case study of an American regional epidemic centre, we have the following stages. They speak of a downturn and exodus, a challenge from below as the authority collapses, the emergence of community response, a declaration of the epidemic and, finally, the reconstitution of authority. Someone has traced the history of the pandemic with four 'R'. They are 'revelation', 'randomness', 'response' and 'retrospection'. Another way of categorizing the history of pandemic is prepared by Chinmay Tumbe in his book *The Age of Pandemics 1817-1920: How they shaped India and the World*. This classification of the stages of pandemic comes from his experience of looking at the history of the past pandemics and the present pandemic. He classifies the stages into: denial, confusion, acceptance and erasure.

Applying the classification of Tumbe in our present pandemic, the first stage of the denial, we can notice from the beginning of the pandemic in China and other nations. Only by December 2019, China accepts of a certain dangerous virus spreading in Wuhan. From that time up to March 2020, we see one way or other denial stage was going on in the activity of the world leaders. Issues were not clear to analyse in the broader perspectives. But by the end of March 2020, World Health Organization declared the situation came out of the spread of the new virus as a Pandemic. When World Health Organization declared the spread of the virus as a harm to the world, it proposed possible methods of preventing the spread of the virus. By this time, governments with the push and pull of its different institutions and different interest groups got struck in indecision on many occasions. World was divided without epistemic clarity about categorical truths about the issues that come up in connection with the pandemic.

7 United Nation's Solution as Model

We live in a very unequal world, full of complexity. First, let us speak about nation states with unequal economic, scientific and technological know-how. Every nation state has its priorities. And in the recent decade's protectionism and nationalism with fascist undertones have affected many major nations of the world. America speaks of 'America and Americans first'. China recently gave absolute and lifelong power to a single supreme leader. In Turkey, Erdogan

is trying to undermine the country's century-old democracy and towards totalitarianism. In India, personality cult of the Prime Minister is growing. In most of these cases, "fear of the other" is the propagandic tool. Every other nation, whether developed, or developing has their way of looking at the issues and making the decisions keeping their national interest as the primary priority. Different stakeholders like multi-national companies and different types of public and private institutions in the national and international arias were making their push and pull in decision making of the nations.

The politics, economics and sciences of our complex world are controlled by secular mentality. The collective wisdom comes from this 'this-world' centred thought brought out the United Nations Organization for a democratic international relationship. Thanks to the United Nations Organization and its specialized agency known as the World Health Organization,³⁰ Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, a health crisis. Every specialized branch of the United Nations Organization has very clear rules and regulations, and act as the highest authority to take control of the international issues pertaining to it. From the day Covid-19 declared a Pandemic, UN started to give guidelines. UN in its recent analysis of the pandemic says, "The COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis. This crisis has highlighted severe fragilities and inequalities within and among nations. Coming out of this crisis will require a whole-of-society, whole-of-government and whole-of-the-world approach driven by compassion and solidarity."³¹ The analysis of the United Nations is quite true. But how shall we understand compassion and solidarity? Do we solve the issues with the secular solutions? Is there an alternative in the traditional religions? Or, can we come out with an ideal path of integration of the scientific and spiritual values of humans? We go for the third option. In the third option, openness to the discoveries of sciences and guiding of life with the spiritual values happen in an integrated way. In this, proper understanding of compassion and solidarity would be central.

A recent book entitled *The Politics of Compassion* by Ala Sirriyeh cites the situation in which the concept of compassion has shifted and been co-opted.³²

30 World Health Organisation (WHO) is one of the international organizations accepted by almost all the nations.

31 Refer, <https://www.undp.org/european-union/covid-19-pandemic>.

32 Ala Sirriyeh narrates two incidents. One was at UK. Ala Sirriyeh visited a local politician's office in the UK seeking support for a Nigerian woman who had been refused asylum and confined to the notorious detention centre Yarl's Wood. A politician's aide, in a reasonable and calm fashion, suggested that deporting the Nigerian woman (and her

In her understanding, the popular understanding of compassion suggests an emotion felt in the face of another person's suffering, where the suffering person is perceived to be distant and inferior. She presents also the real etymological meaning of compassion though 'outdated' today, as 'suffering together with another': 'your suffering is my suffering!'. This etymological meaning will emerge only in the context of solidarity which is hospitality in a migration context. But solidarity in our modern context generates hostility to 'groups' that we consider as one or other form of a 'threat'.

Conclusion

If we look through the glass of Daniel Kahneman, Nassim Taleb, Michael Shermer etc., we are wired to confirmation bias, narrative fallacies, patternicity, agenticity etc. Whether we like it or not, we religious believers need introspection about this issue of hostility to 'groups' that we consider as 'threat' affecting our judgements. But our ethical and spiritual ideals base themselves on democratic values. We see the failure of governments and influential factors in policy making and implementing all over the world. If we take individually, each of the persons involved in decision making of the systems are good, but in a systemic situation, there are groups that suffer. We need to take seriously the voices of the young persons like Greta Thunberg. If we fail to address the issues they raise, what Nassim Taleb said about Covid-19 pandemic as "it stands as a portent of a more fragile global system" become true. This will be a situation where fear, panic and greed affect in an uncertain way the individual and collective conscience, private and public institutions, governmental and non-governmental organisations. In order to limit the evils of these 'demons of the heart', we need to fill ourselves with the virtues of the heart.

child) would save her from the suffering of being in limbo in the UK: a 'compassionate refusal'; a compassionate deportation. The next incident of the subversion of the language of caring compassion from Sweden. There the anti-immigrant political party supporters describe their campaigning to prevent immigration as an act of care. Campaigning against immigration is described as a means of caring, not only for local Swedes but also for the migrants themselves. In this logic, xenophobia is a form of compassion towards asylum seekers, as well as towards one's fellow citizens. (Ref. Hannah Bradby, "Compassion and Solidarity", Oct 9, 2019 available at <https://www.cost-of-living.net/3665-2/>).

Rediscovering Touch in the Difficult Time of Pandemic

Jojo Varakukalayil, CST

Abstract:

We are at a Post-normal age, though not certainly, a time when our age-old ways of being about are any longer normally possible; and, thus, it remains a time beyond the normal time. The Pandemic Covid-19 has brought us into a burning pitch where human life is threatened by being present to one another as each of us are the potential carriers of the corona virus. The widespread of corona virus have left us into a panicking situation of being distant to one another where carnal closeness is alarming. This paper analyses the meaning and possibility of touch during the pandemic as social distancing is a Covid-19 protocol. Even if, social media platforms have brought in social connectivity over the social distancing, it has neither assured us nearness nor an exit from human isolation. Aren't we facing the crisis of touch - our most vital sense - during the pandemic? Social distancing has amplified it both physically and morally. The more it is denied the more one wants it. This paper analyses the very understanding of touch as our most vital sense; then, it investigates on certain philosophical traditions of the body and touch; and, finally, it discusses the sense and meaning of touching beyond touch, thus to argue, how touch is significant far beyond the carnal dimension at the difficult times of the Pandemic.

Keywords: *pandemic, body, carnal, touch, untouchability, affectivity, sense, sensibilité*

Introduction

We are at the post-normal age, though not certainly, a time when our age-old ways of being about are not normally possible, and it remains a time beyond the normal time. The pandemic Covid-19 has brought us into a burning pitch where human life is threatened by being present to one another. Being present

to one another is made felt through and through one's body in the medium of one's own bodily senses. Senses are first hand carriers of this experience. Nearness and carnal contact lead us to living experience of everyday life. The widespread of corona virus left us into the panicking situation of being distant to one another. The Pandemic Covid-19 has brought us into a burning pitch where human life is threatened by being present to one another as each of us are the potential carriers of the corona virus. The widespread of corona virus have left us into a panicking situation of being distant to one another where carnal closeness is alarming.

This paper analyses the meaning and possibility of touch during the pandemic as social distancing is a Covid-19 protocol. Even if, social media platforms have brought in social connectivity over the social distancing, it has neither assured us nearness nor an exit from human isolation. Aren't we facing the crisis of touch - our most vital sense - during the pandemic? Social distancing has amplified it both physically and morally. The more it is denied the more one wants it. This paper analyses the very understanding of touch as our most vital sense; then, it investigates on certain philosophical traditions of the body and touch; and, finally, it discusses the sense and meaning of touching beyond touch, thus to argue, how touch is significant far beyond the carnal dimension at the difficult times of the Pandemic.

1 The Sense of Touch

The two degrees of human cognitive activities are intellect and senses. Bodily organs are the fundamental mode of these cognitive activities. The senses knowledge is limited by its hylomorphic composition, for they are all guided by the respective sense organs. The material condition of each organ works as specific to the operation of the faculty of sense knowledge. The feeling come about to us through our corporeal nature. The mere physical properties received by the physical organ does not give us the knowledge rather the intentional sense comes about by certain processes such as stimulation of sense organ, the unity between the organ and the faculty, and the reception of the form in the faculty. "The activity of the sensible object and that of the percipient sense," for Aristotle, "is one and the same activity."¹ It speaks of the immanent activity, the immateriality of the senses, and thus there is a connection between the act of knowledge and the object of knowledge. Hence, sense knowledge is something more than the mere physical changes or chemical reactions rather it has certain intentional connection of sense and meaning.

1 Aristotle, *On the Soul* (London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), III 2, 425 b6.

Among the various senses the sense of touch plays a very significant role, i.e., the sense touch and touching is the way we explore into our being. Touch is the most primary of all senses. The sense of touch remains as a window to all other senses. Ranging from the early days of our birth to the last the sense of touch functions as the most basic of all. Human beings, for Thomas Aquinas, possess the sense of touch in the most perfect degree. Humans are more developed in the sense of touch compared to all other animals. Touch and being touched has more sense in our ontological condition itself. The most significant aspect of the senses is that humans possess, in the strict sense, their senses, and through the interaction of senses we perceive reality. Hence, perception through senses do not reside only in the material realm of the body rather it is taken to its transcendent realm as going beyond the sensible data of perceptible knowledge. Thus, the sense of touch being the most significant can lead beyond perception. Touch and being touched gets more implicated sense in the making of meaning.

2 On Touching in the Crisis of Pandemic

Unlike in the past, humanity at large is in the middle of a new threat, the novel corona virus and the Covid-19 Pandemic. The pandemic is now turned out to be an endemic despite the many efforts to tame the virus. The cost of the pandemic is very high priced. The tragedy of lives, broken families, and scared communities, the economic and social changes caused by a pandemic will constitute a new variant of culture that will live longer in our memories and those of future generations. The pain is personal, emotional, psychological, societal, economic, and cultural; and it will leave scars in many hearts for sure. Amidst the many crises the problem of social distancing has made us islands and floating beings. The pandemic brought in a psychological crisis affecting on every strata of the society be it children or the elderly, the rich or the poor. It was a real test on our realizations on ethics and questioned whether what we thought was right earlier could be right in the new environment. Our call of being more responsible and committed to the other was raised to new levels. It opened new ways of reaching out to the other, with its own limitations and benefits, which were considered earlier as impractical. The cause of our religiosity was also questioned and we were forced to find its true meaning in the middle of the pandemic.

We realize that our existence today is increasingly lived at a distance in a corona world. As we move from flesh to image by social distancing we are in danger of losing touch with one another. We have become more virtual and our embodied experience is reduced to mere global connectivity. Touch

is primordial to our individual and common selves. How do you present yourself tangibly to yourself and to the other in this corona world? Social distancing has become the rule of the day by keeping oneself self-enclosed in being. The sense of touch must be reconsidered in the context of social distancing. How can one touch the other without being physically touched? Being touched, I think, is the most primordial way that we are present to ourselves and to one another. Hence, we must really look into the question of our sense of touch beyond the sense perception to its sense of meaning as we are embodied beings.

Being in flesh as ‘incarnatedness’ is much different from having a body. Incarnation is not being in a body but being in flesh. Being in flesh comes first rather than being in the body, for only being in flesh, one can touch, feel joy or sorrow, hunger or thirst and undergo each of these moments as one’s own. Being in flesh is the way one is exposed to the vulnerability of the body in its pure exposure. One experiences oneself and the other in the first person. How can we hold back our experience of being touched and affected by the other person in a socially distanced world is an imperative? Being in flesh remains a point of deeper significance now, more than ever before. Embodied being is the way s/he touches each of us in our vulnerable selves, in our pure facticity and finitude. Our bodyliness, in corona-stricken world, is the way of caring the other beyond flesh as pure exposedness. Body remains more than a medium of touch to the pure exposure of being affected of our vulnerability. A phenomenology of touch is beyond the phenomenon of touch to the non-phenomenon of the touch, i.e., being signified in touching.

3 Social Distancing and the Crisis of Touch

Touch is a fundamental form of non-visual perception, one that lays a crucial role in nearly all of our sensory experiences is a feature noted by Gibson.² The sense of touch remains as one of the most fundamental truth because it remains as the basis of many other experiences. Philosophically, for us, it is significant since it has connections to many bodily awareness. Prior to moving into the significant aspect of touch one needs to clarify its proper terminological meaning. “What we typically refer to as ‘the sense of touch’ is what we will call ‘active’ or ‘haptic’ touch. This refers to touch that involves some movement. This movement can be voluntary, explanatory movements of the hands and other sensory surfaces involved in touch, or it can also refer

2 Gibson. J. J. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996.

to experiences generated by objects moving against a stationary body.”³ The bodily awareness of touch is most vital of all senses but the pandemic has brought us to suspect this vital sense. In a time of virus affected pandemic each one remains a potential carrier or transmitter of the corona virus. This calls forth an alarming situation of social distancing which might safeguard each one. But one must really look into the sense of touch in an age of “eclipse of touch”.⁴ In the context of the pandemic social distancing we need to loudly think into the dynamics of sensations of touch and being touched.

4 Philosophies on Touch and Touching

Human being as *'Anthropos'* in the etymological sense as *anthropei* – ‘looks up what he has seen’ is an upward being when Plato says, ‘man is the spectator of all existence’. This presents Western philosophy as the “optocentric paradigm”.⁵ Kearney observes that it is Aristotle who gives a first philosophy of touch and he considers the sense of touch, was relegated to other senses within the framework of the ‘optocentric paradigm’ (sight centered) in the west. Only recently with the intervention of the twentieth century phenomenology the sense of touch was revisited. For Aristotle touch was the basis and most universal of the senses. The whole of human body is open to this aspect of the tangibility through skin. In comparing to the other senses Aristotle notes that it is the most sensitive of all other, yet, it is not lost in to. Touch knows differences, thus serving as our basic power to discriminate between diverse kinds of persons and things. What is most striking from Aristotle is that ‘intelligence begins with the vulnerability of the skin. Touch was taken to mean the animal part as it is immediately linked to the body, and the vision as linked to intellectual or spiritual. Against the Platonic tradition that glorified the sense of sight Aristotle considers touch as most primary and flesh as the medium (*metaxu*), for flesh is not an organ rather a complex mediating membrane. Tactful sensation is the possibility of the humans to respond to each singularity with difference.”⁶

Although Aristototian claim, at Platonic time, was not a winning argument it finds its way forward in the twentieth century phenomenological

3 Fulkerson, Matthew, "Touch," The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/touch/>>. Accessed on Saturday, 9 October, 2021.

4 Richard Kearney, *Touch – Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 139.

5 *Ibid.*, 34.

6 *Ibid.*, 30-38.

philosophies of the body. Touching is considered as the most basic and encompassing sensations and a fundamental sensitivity, nevertheless, it remains elusive. In considering touch we must understand that touch is not a one-way traffic rather it is a two-way traffic, i.e., when we touch we are also being touched. It works both ways. One is being touched in touching. There is something more than the stimulus response to the affectivity of the body. The mother-infant relation is one that of being affected and being touched from within. There is something more than the carnal contact that we learn in this infant-mother relation. The world of the mother and baby remains a world of their experience that is the truth indeed. For Kearney, “To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be connected with other in a way that prizes us open. Flesh is open-hearted – where we are most exposed, skin on skin [...]”⁷

5 Phenomenology of Body and Touch

Many of the substance ontologies of the Western philosophical tradition have differently played its crucial role in defining and determining the human subject. Ever since the Platonic subject to the post-modern tradition, the question of the subjectivity of the subject have been differently addressed, though not rightly. Nevertheless, there is something very interesting with regard to the distinction between Body (*korper*) and lived body (*leib*) we learn from Husserl’s *Cartesian Mediations*.⁸ Rene Descartes, in *Meditations on the First Philosophy*,⁹ understands body as *res extensa*, an object of material composition that is extended in space and time. Descartes wrote in his Letter to Elizabeth on June 28, 1643 about the union of the body and soul.¹⁰

For Descartes, the subject/the self is *res cogitans* - a spiritual substance over against the material substance, which is incapable of doing what the *res cogitans* do. The body is merely an object of material substance and the ‘I’ as self is a mind or thinking thing. To this dualist version of the self, many of the

7 Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense*, 41.

8 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 97.

9 By body, I understand all that is capable of being bounded up by some shape, of being enclosed in a place, and of filling up a space in such a way as to exclude any other body from it [...] of being moved in several ways, not, of course, by itself, but by whatever impinges upon it (1998, 64). Existentialism, 50-51. Rene Descartes, *Discourses on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. D. A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 64.

10 Rene Descartes, *Mediations and other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003), 152-54.

contemporary thinkers have re-discovered the significance of the body, mostly, in the phenomenological tradition. Husserl's phenomenological philosophy has tried to address such issues; however, later phenomenological movement headed by Martin Heidegger, Maurice-Merleau-Ponty, Michelle Henry, and Emmanuel Levinas have adequately meditated on the question of the body as subjectivity. Husserl makes a real distinction between the physical body as the quantifiable that appears in the perceptual field and the corporeality as experienced within as an arrangement of the perceptual field. The aspect of the embodiment is much indebted to Husserl's meaning as he analyses in his work *Ideas II* (1912). The distinction that Husserl brings in is significant to the analysis of intersubjectivity. Husserl writes,

Among the bodies belonging to this "nature" and included in my peculiar ownness, I then find my *animate organism* as *uniquely* singled out – namely as the only one of them that is not just a body but precisely an animate organism: the sole Object within my abstract world-stratum to which, in accordance with experience I ascribe *fields of sensation* (belonging to it, however, in different manners – a field of tactual sensations, a field of warmth and coldness, and so forth), the only Object "in" which I "*rule and govern*" *immediately*, governing particularly in each of its "organs".¹¹

Touching kinesthetically, I perceive, "with" my hands; seeing kinesthetically, I perceive also "with" my eyes; and so forth; moreover, I can perceive thus at any time. Meanwhile the *kinesthesias* pertaining to the organs flow in the mode "I am doing", and are subject to my "I can", furthermore, by calling these *kinesthesias* into play, I can push, thrust, and so forth, and can thereby "act" *somatically* – immediately, and then mediately. As *perceptively* active, I *experience* (or can experience) *all of Nature, including my own animate organism*, which therefore in the process is reflexively related to itself. That becomes possible because "I can" perceive one hand "by means of" the other, an eye by means of a hand, and so forth – a procedure in *which the functioning organ must become an Object and Object a functioning organ*. And it is the same in the case of my generally possible original *dealing* with Nature and with my animate organism itself, by means of this organism – which therefore is reflexively related to itself *also in practice*.¹²

Although, Husserl is wedded to the transcendental consciousness and the intentional content, one could read into this investigative mind of Husserlian

¹¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 97.

¹² *Ibid.*

philosophy where Husserl finds his momentum i.e., there is something beyond the perceptive mind and beyond the panoptical reason that surpasses all *ideatum*. This is particularly the other; the alterity of the other, so to say the otherness of the other which is characterised as other than me. This primordial situation or event of the other who approaches me from beyond, that is, “the other is what I am not”¹³ is a true moment of departure from the egoism of the ego to the radical other who stands beyond and above me; the other as the alien other: a lived body as (*leib*) who cannot be reduced into my ownness. This is the null site of the ‘inter-subjects’; rather to say the site of ‘inter-human’. Here nothing can be reduced into my ownness for the thinking cogito. However, this is not the field of arrangement of the perceptual field of the subject. Husserlian transcendental ego appears to be the possibility for the transcendence beyond the sphere of ownness in the direction of another ego. The difficulty with Husserlian transcendental ego is that it finds nothing beyond its ownness. Nothing remains alien, but every other is immersed into the crucible of the immanent stream of consciousness.

The significance of the distinction given above would definitely lead to the investigation of how the body is lived, felt and experienced as a subject. Here, the body as lived is not a crude material inert matter rather a first-person experience of the self as a subject. Many of the Existentialist’s account of the body as subjectivity is far beyond the materialist’s conception as pure objectified matter or idealists’ conceptions of detached selves. Prominent existentialists like Gabriel Marcel or Jean-Paul Sartre remains true to such accounts of the body more than materiality. Far beyond many such accounts Levinas early account of the self-as-enjoying subject claims to pay deeper significance to the bodily subject as embodied being who plunges in the elemental reality of the world where one is not objectively thrown into the world or subjectively knowing the world as place into it; rather one remains one’s self through and through by one’s materiality as sobering up in the enjoyment of its being as an elemental reality. The subjectivity of the subject is made possible in and through the materiality of its being as an embodied subject. The subject, per say, in no way an idealist’s subject who is a spiritual substance in the world rather the subjectivity of the subject is made possible through an incarnate subject in its embodiedness.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh/Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 54.

6 On Touch and Touching

Merleau-Ponty considers humans far beyond the classic phenomenological tradition itself as more than historical rootedness of the being-in-the-world. Overagainst Cartesian dualist subject Merleau-Ponty considers human being as 'body-subject'. There is a dimension of the bodily experience that is beyond the language, culture, and thought. The affective world of my everyday experience in the medium of my body that make me who I am. The perceptual activity of the body remains the dimension of my being-in-the-world. The idea of the body in Merleau-Ponty has a deeper significance to the sense of intercorporeality; where he understands the individual more in terms of the sense of feelings, perceptions, and movements of the body (*le corps propre*). One needs to understand oneself far beyond the traditional individual subject as autonomous and self-legislative structure.

The autonomous subject of the traditional modern philosophy is redefined or re-invented in Merleau-Ponty. In certain sense he overturns the traditional understanding of the subject as a rational subject to that of a bodily subject who is a being-in-the-world. My corporeality is the conditional possibility for my being in the world. Thus, I am a worldly being in so far as I am a bodily being. The human exists as worldly and bodily. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, writes,

I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with that world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together compromise a system, so my body and the other's are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon, and the anonymous existence of which my body is the ever-renewed trace henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.¹⁴

What is key to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the human being as being-in-the-world is the meaning of human existence and interconnected and inter-related in the bodily sense which far beyond the sense of the subject-object relation. This is a dimension more than the intentional to the sentient corporeal being.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. trans. Donald A. Landes (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 353-354.

One finds oneself being in the same elemental tissue that he calls as the 'flesh'. He writes, "The flesh we are speaking of is not a matter. It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touch the things, such that, simultaneously, *a* stangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself [...]." ¹⁵ The flesh is the overlapping, shared medium through which I am in the world. This experience of the bodyliness as being shared with one another as intertwining opens the possibility for being affected and touched by the other. Judith Butler rightly observes that "the flesh is not something one has, but, rather the web in which one lives; it is not simply what I touch of the other, or of myself, but the condition of possibility of touch, a tactility that exceeds any given touch and that cannot be reducible to unilateral performed by a subject." ¹⁶

Experiencing oneself through one's body does not limit one to one's inmost being alone rather we sense the possibility for moral orientation in this sensibility. The flesh as the fact of body, for Merleau-Ponty, is "mass in itself and gesture." ¹⁷ Bodily vulnerability takes one to the moral vulnerability beyond the logical construct of the reason and thinking. The experience of touch and touching is far beyond the material realm. For Merleau-Ponty,

To touch and to touch oneself (to touch oneself=touched-touching) [...] They do not coincide in the body: the touching is never exactly the touched. This does not mean that they coincide "in the mind" or at the level of "consciousness". Something else than the body is needed for the junction to be made: it takes the place in the untouchable. That of the other which I will never touch. But what I will never touch, he does not touch either, nor privilege of oneself over the other here [...]. ¹⁸

This allows one to experience the pain and penury of the other in proximity which remains far beyond the carnal contact. One embodies the feelings of the ailing other in proximity; for we share the same elemental flesh. This elementality that which knots us the knot that we fell with the other beyond the rise of reason. One witnesses oneself in this affective order for one is already

15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 146.

16 Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New Delhi: Dev Publishers & Distributors, 2019), 37.

17 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 271.

18 *Ibid.*, 254.

in it. This shall not be reduced into my immanent conscious intentional act of feeling with/for the other, rather, it is the vivid experience of experience of bodily presence of other in proximity¹⁹, namely, the suffering other, the ailing other, and truly the other who affects me from beyond. Such affectivity is beyond the reciprocal or altruistic sense to a realm of one's embodiedness as one's being-in-the-world.

7 On Touch and the Coronavirus

The pandemic has brought us into a situation of a life with certain protocol which at first demands social distancing. To certain extent everyone is untouchable no matter who one is. There arose a level of fear of touch and this fear of touch itself has brought us into a pitch of pain of deprivation of touch itself. Kearney writes,

Touch is never so obvious as when confronted with its opposite – untouchable. The imperative of social distancing, mandated by the corona virus, made us acutely aware of how central touch is to our lives. The threat of contagion through physical contact meant tactile encounters were kept to a minimum, if not outlawed – everyone considered a potential carrier of the invisible virus. We could no longer reach out to touch others or touch our faces with our hands (rapidly realizing how often we did just that). [...]. The more touch is impossible, the more one wants it and appreciates it how vital it is to our being. Much in the way that death – where the tactile body ceases – reminds us of the tangible meaning of life.²⁰

Kearney, brilliantly, points out that Julia Kristeva in *Corriere del Serra* analyzed how the pandemic brought us down to confront our basic fragility by exposing three core problems of 'globalized man' in the digital age: solitude experienced as loneliness, intolerance of limits, and the repression of our mortality.

I am struck by our contemporary incapacity to be alone. All this hyper-connected exaltation makes us live in isolation in front of screens. This has not abolished loneliness, but has ensconced it in the social media, has compressed it in messages and data. People already devastated by loneliness find themselves more alone today, because although they have words, signs, icons, they

19 Merleau-Ponty refers to the enfant who is a sentient being living in its affective order of bodily sensibility prior to the intellectual.

20 Kearney, *Touch – Recovering our most Vital Sense*, 133.

have lost the flesh of the words, sensations, sharing, tenderness, duty towards the other, care for the other. We give the flesh of words as a sacrificial offering to the virus and to malady, but we were already orphans of that human dimension that is shared passion. All of a sudden, we realize that we are alone and that we have lost touch with our inner core. We are selves of the screens that have not at all abolished loneliness but have only absorbed it. This is where the recent anxiety anger come from.²¹

The social distancing however has not socially disconnected us. Thanks to the modern technologies! There is something more than the carnal contact in touch, touching and being touched. Let me read into the more the given in the carnal contact or physical touch as such. Touching is affective and moving. In order to be able to be moved, one must be bodily through and through, it means to say, one must have a heart of flesh that is sensitive and vulnerable to what happens to the other. This is what happens between the inter-humans i.e., being touched, and being able to be moved. Our 'lived body', Gabriel Marcel says, 'is our spirit'. We live through our body and our spirit is the way that we live in it. Our 'lived body' is the way we live our spirit. However, this shall not be understood that we coincide with the materiality of our body, but, rather, wish to connote that our lived body is the bearer and condition of possibility for our spirit. There is no spirit without body: that is our human condition and human experience. We are human to the extent we become aware of our pure possibility of being touched from within. Being touched here does not imply a touch that is brought about in the sensual level, rather, it would imply a touch beyond that marrow of one's bones. In being touched, one enters into the level of an irritable self who is moved from within, a certain kind of irritability that allows no self-complacency.

Often, we say that we cannot stand the pain of the other in front of us; one is sensitive i.e., *sensibilité* – the possibility of being affected by the other. This sensibility is the experience without concept. Prior to our thinking we are affected in our sensibility i.e., we are affected in our flesh. My relationship to the other is primarily originates from this affective aspect of my body. Being in body is the way that one is exposed to the other. Hence, this remains the first mark of our relation to the other in our pure vulnerability. In facing the pain and misery of the other one is touched and moved by the other. This is not affecting directly into our spirit, rather, we sense it or, we are affected through our bodies. The injustice of the other is not touching directly in our spirit, separated from or, despite our body, but, on the other hand through our body.

21 As cited in *Ibid.*, 137-38.

This is our sensitivity. Because our subjective sensitivity is at the same time bodily perception, the spiritual comes about in and through our bodily sensitivity. This sensibility is our vulnerability as experienced in our pure exposure and exposedness. What is the content of this sensibility or sensitivity, which is prior to choice, is an essential tangibleness that is already given with our bodily condition. In corona times, we are touched by the other truly because we are tangible and we are tangible because we are bodily through and through. The sensitivity is our spirituality in ourselves, by the fortunes and misfortunes of the other. This heteronomous sensitivity is at the same time a bodily sensitivity, through and through. The meaning of incarnation is made felt through our bodily tangibleness, i.e., the incarnation of human subjectivity is the guarantee of its spirituality. Human affectivity is the possibility of being touched and moved from within towards the other. Incarnation of God is the mode of his touch to the human fragility to be a being touched from inside out.

8 Signification of Touch as Touching

Covid-19 protocol restrictions brought about a situation of social distancing so as to warrant oneself either by being a potential carrier of the virus or by being infected by a potential carrier. Although there is a fear of being infected by the potential virus carrier, there is a fact of being affected by the other who is already infected by the virus. This is an ethical juncture that cries for attending and heeding to the need of an individual who is totally isolated both from within and from the society. Existentially this is very vulnerable situation where one is ontologically alone; having no one to attend. As mentioned above, at this moment of the ethical that happens between the individuals who are isolated there is a moment of being affected or touched by the plea of the other, namely, the last sigh of man dying. The other penetrates into one's existence, the other touches me without touching. One is being touched though not externally or in carnal contact. The other touches me in the imperative. The pain and misery of the other leaves me with an essential affect with an ethical character which cannot be assimilated into my ways and doings.

There is something more fundamental to the truth of this affect without a content. The essential vulnerability and nudity of the other manifested in his/her misery is locus of the heteronomous character such affectivity. Here, one is called upon by the 'arraignment' that reveals one's duty towards the other in misery. Precisely, this experience of being affected by the essential

vulnerability of the other is the beginning of the 'touch' without being touched, an experience of bodily excess – i.e., a bodily awareness without being in carnal contact. Is there something or such a thing as being affected in one's body without being physically affected? Alas, it is the ethical moment of being affected from within. The corona infected person is the locus of this affect without a content. One is feeling the other within without being indicated; but rather accused from within. The appeal of the other is one that I cannot ignore and the other in his or her bodily appearance that touches and wounds me, and I feel this in my own heart and flesh. The misfortune of the other is visible in his/her body.

The bodily affectivity is sensitivity to the other, i.e., being sensitive to the other beyond reason and modern rationality. One is ethical to the sense one can respond to the imperative addressed by vulnerable other from his/her mishap. One turns to other through his/her body as a point of one's sensibility to the other. Inter-human ethics, in this sense, has to do with 'being touched' and 'being able to be touched' by the misery of the concrete other in his or her existentiality. For Gabriel Marcel, our lived body, bodily subject, is our 'spirit'. Our lived body is not coinciding with the materiality of our body rather, our lived body is the bearer and condition of possibility of our spirit. Body is the locus of the spirit and it is the event of the soul. It is not an appendix attached to our being as a secondary substance, rather, we are through and through our body. This human condition is the condition that no one could un-condition itself. In concrete existential situation one is affected by the misery of the other which does not merely affect us spiritually rather bodily. We are moved and touched beyond touching.

Levinas offers a very different understanding of embodiment in terms of the passivity of the body and this lies in the materiality as exposure to the other in proximity. The exposure of the body is the vulnerability of the self to be otherwise than itself. The vulnerable skin of the self makes this experience something prior to the will. Here, Levinas points to the animation of the body as ethical exposure to the other. There is an interruption that is being awakened by the other. Levinas writes, "I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the Same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one's-skin, having the other-in-one's-skin."²²

22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh/Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114-115.

The dimension of sensibility operates in a deeper manner which is beyond the bodily perception, the French term '*sensibilité*'. Here, we must rightly understand that the meaning of *sensibilité* is not to be taken as an active operation from the part of the agent, rather it remains in ethical passive. Yet it doesn't mean to say that one is indifferent rather *sensibilité* is the conditional possibility of one's being vulnerable to the other i.e., I am a being who is capable of being affected by the other, for I am essentially a bodily being. Creatureliness would mean to be a being for the other prior to any active engagement for the needs of the other. This is an essential condition of my being as a lived body, for it accounts for my tangibility. I am affected by the other truly because I am a tangible being. It is not because that I am in carnal contact with the other but prior to carnal relationship with the other there exists already a relation prior to any relationship on account of my tangibility itself. Bodily exposure is a condition of the subject as passive. Levinasian account of the body and materiality is very different from the traditional accounts. The body is event itself and it is more than a medium of the soul to express itself and materiality, here, is not to be confused either with the limiting perfection of the human subject or the contamination of the spirit, for it is rather the entire reality of the human subject. Thus, my materiality is my body and my way of being in the world and it is through my body that I am in the world. Here, bodyliness would mean to say that I am a being who can be moved from within without the choice of my action, a certain passivity. Before the commencement of an action towards the other, i.e., being proactive, one is already built into it. "Thus, my passivity indicates the presence and passion of what is not me and what is situated at the core of who I am as a fundamental scission."²³ The meaning of passivity can perhaps sound to what Butler would argue that "To the extent that I continue to be capable of touching, I am being touched [...]"²⁴ In being touched or affected I am being fissured from within, nay, without my choice. It brings into an aspect of the passivity of the self. This remains the signification of touch as touching.

Conclusion

Corona time is a call addressed to each of us to respond to the miserability of the other in proximity. This essential vulnerability of the other is the mode how the other presents his/her self to me. The other in his/her suffering touches me, not in the indicative, but in the imperative. There is an ethical

²³ Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

dimension opened up to me in the pure exposure of the other as a call to respond to his/her plightfulness. This is a condition that conditions me from all my vicissitudes of life whereby I am appealed to. The other in her bodily appearance touches me and wounds me, and I feel this in my own heart and flesh. Even when suffering of the other is psychological, social, or spiritual, this misfortune still becomes visible in bodily, earthly forms. The other becomes a scruple (*scrupulous*) meaning, a pebble in the shoe that doesn't permit one to remain standing still, but forces one to take a following step. Hence, the encountering the affected and afflicted other is a moment of disquiet that works its way through soul obstructively. Thus, scruple is a discomfort. One is not permitted from inside to be quiet and comfortable. One undergoes a self-contraction from inside.

This is an inspired orientation – spiritual – of the overarching action to make one's self available to the other. This shows the earthly character – true character – of the spirituality. The spiritual is truly earthly and bodily meaning to say an en-thused and in-spired life. The spirituality does not take place amidst people as merely spiritual creatures, but precisely insofar as they are bodily and earthly creatures. The incarnation of the human being is the possibility of mercy as aid and assistance, to which the other as a human being has a right. It is through body, rather taking in body, in-carnation, that we are sensitive to the misery of the other in corona affected period. It is only through body that one can transform this sensitivity into action, literally, our resources and riches, capabilities and capacities, our science and technology into attend to the other. God taking body is the way that God enters into the human realm of touching us to bring healing and health. Incarnation does not remain in the conceptual theologization but as a participatory event of becoming human – being in flesh – through one's enfleshment as being affected and touched from inside for the other. The finite good is too short and it's not total good, where good remains in the order of grace, the gratuity of its givenness. Being in flesh at corona times is a way of incarnating oneself to be touched beyond bodyliness to the spiritual through the body. Flesh is the first door of the entry to the spirit of being touched and inspired.

Corona Virus and Biopower Body as the Site of Control

Nishant A. Irudayadason

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to look at the management of the pandemic from the perspectives of body and biopower. With numerous restrictions imposed on us, Foucault's analysis of biopower seems to have seen the light of the day through many policies and programmes that effectively exercise control on people, which includes "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life." We shall analyse this control through three broad themes such as obsession with loss, deprivation of human touch and finally acceleration of biopower.

Keywords: *Body, biopower, bodies, obsession, deprivation.*

Introduction

The whole of humanity is changing faster and human cultures that are centres of production of meaning and value which are more than ever de-territorialized.¹ "The condition of embodied beings is evolving, thanks to emotional, political or economic crises,"² and to modernity, a complex notion which gives us an understanding of the evolution of our relation to world, space and time. The Covid-19 pandemic has taught us more about the world we live in than about the virus itself. We shall discuss in this essay what we learn from the perspective of our relationship to the body, through the prism of contemporary precariousness and biopower—power exercised by States and institutions on our lives and on our bodies—which has become tools of political life and now of public health.³ In this context, managing risks amounts to controlling bodies through a process of

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005).

2 Pascal Perez, "L'homme monde, ou la citoyenneté globale" *Après-demain*, 9, 2009, 14-15.

3 Rylan Higgins, Emily Martin and Maria D. Vesperi, "An Anthropology of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Anthropology Now*, 12:1, 2020, 2-6, doi: 10.1080/19428200.2020.1760627.

constant quantification, acting on symptoms and producing figures that bring legitimacy for public action: biological or physical life seems predominant over social or political life.

It is revealing that the Covid-19 pandemic has given substance to the fine analysis of state governance, which oscillates between protection and exclusion, political denial and fear. In the context of citizens' growing mistrust of leaders, public policies have hastily and unprecedentedly privileged the biological health of individuals, therefore creating a political legitimacy to control lives, affecting individual freedoms and obstructing bio-psycho-social existence for many individuals. Over the course of the decisions taken by the governments of the world, a large part of humanity has found itself successively confined, kept at a distance, and even embarrassed about relationships. Many citizens felt imprisoned in their bodies, prevented from movement, scrutinized, even anathematized. In their inability to admit their isolation, to project themselves and to produce a clear analysis of their situation, many people felt destabilized, psychologically troubled. Under the prism of uncertainties resulting from an unprecedented crisis, new apprehensions and obsessions appear.

1 Obsession with Loss

The fear of going crazy, of losing one's mind, which appeared in the Age of Enlightenment,⁴ has been gradually replaced by another great fear, that of the contemporary form of precariousness where the obsession to *lose* dominates: losing one's job, money, housing, family, status; in short, one's social objects. With the pandemic, it is necessary to add the fear of losing one's biological body. The emphasis on biological life, bare life⁵ with no other quality than that of not being deprived of life, certainly has the advantage of promoting hygiene and medicine, but it is not sufficient to define a dignified and qualified existence, capable of appearing on the social scene through action and speech, to use the expression of Hannah Arendt.⁶ In this context, the "hypermodern"

4 Olga A. Vlasova, "Postmodern Historiography of Psychiatry: M. Foucault, R. Castel, M. Gauchet, and G. Swain," *Neurology Bulletin*, 48, no. 4 (2016): 67-70. doi: 10.17816/nb14030.

5 We owe the concept of "bare life" to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, in a text entitled "Towards the critique de la violence," which is published as a book in English under the same title. See Walter Benjamin, *Towards the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 175.

modality of fear of death becomes the linchpin of biopower. To be overly afraid of losing one's body, of losing one's life, of being confronted with the conditions of bare life, is very different from the fear of dying. To put it inconsequentially, to be afraid of dying is not the intimate knowledge of our mortality resulting in a transformation of the living into survivors.

1.1 Constitutive Human Precariousness

Let us recall the difference between good and bad precariousness. The constitutive human precariousness, which we cannot do without, is to accept the necessary dependence on others to live. This is typical of a human baby. The baby needs to be cared for. He dies, if he is not cared for in a respectful and benevolent hand-to-hand manner. The baby can express his or her needs only by crying and shouting, a tone manifesting that his or her primary attachment to the mother is of the order of security and trust. This is also true of the elderly, the bedridden, even those who suffer exile, long-term unemployment, mourning, and emotional breakdowns. The lockdown has come to remind us, with vigour, of the fact that this is also the case for each one of us even if we do not suffer any particular vulnerability.

If we translate into notional terms what the baby thinks and feels in a good precarious situation into notional terms, it is likely as follows: 'if I am cared for in this way, it is because I am good, the other wishes me well and I have confidence in the great time that is coming.' Constitutive precariousness gives indeed a triple confidence – in oneself, in the other and in the great time to come.

1.2 Notion of Triple Trust

1. Self-confidence: I have confidence in myself, because if I am helped when I need it, it is because I am good enough, it is that I am worth it. This builds self-esteem and self-love. So, when I need help, I ask the other. The ability to ask for help and reciprocally to offer help is articulated with the second level of trust.
2. Trust in the other: If the other helps me, it is because he does not want me harm: I am not in social paranoia; the other is benevolent, he wishes me well. I will certainly have to learn, as I grow up, to distinguish between the "good guys", the "bad guys", the "perverts", and the "non-perverts". Not everyone is nice, but not everyone is bad. It is clear that when disasters such as certain floods or epidemics occur, that a certain number of people begin to help others more easily, that a new solidarity is triggered almost

automatically. This does not prevent others from withdrawing, isolating, fearing, looting and predating.

3. Confidence in great time: “If I lose everything tomorrow, there will always be someone to help me: my family, a social worker, my neighbour, an association.” It is the anticipation carried by good precariousness, which is a confidence in the “good time” that is not the bad time of permanent urgency, manic excitement, fear of losing, which is in fact a form of social melancholy.

Constitutive precariousness is particularly important with regard to humans, because of our awareness of our fragility, our dependence, and our mortality. The obsession with loss is observed in the contemporary form of precariousness, as we have already suggested, namely a perversion of good to bad precariousness, which leads to the loss of triple trust, with the anguish of losing social objects. Overall, a precarious society, in the negative sense of this term, is obsessed with the fear of losing social objects. It is the misery of rich countries, which has gradually been exported to developing countries. Let us note how financial flow, which normally gives confidence in credit, production, consumption, the security of having, actually generate the fear of loss. Basically, poor societies are not afraid of losing: they want to have something to live on, for their children and for the members of the group. But when they become precarious in their turn, as is the case in our time, they also acquire this obsession with loss, marked by the appearance of hyper individualism, mistrust, paranoid and the loss of great time.⁷

The social objects that we fear losing are concrete things like work, money, housing, training, diplomas, status, acquired benefits – and this list is not exhaustive. We have or we don’t have any. They give the “basic security” whose loss can initiate social and/or psychological precariousness.

2 Deprivation of Human Touch

Touch is part of human’s vital needs from an early age, as demonstrated by Tiffany Field,⁸ a psychologist who heads the *Touch Research Institute* at Miami School of Medicine in the United States. Field has also shown that children who touch each other have less aggression between them than children who

7 P. J. Laurent, “Éléments pour une socioanthropologie de la défiance,” in Yann Algan et Pierre Cahuc, *La Société de défiance* (Paris: ULM, 2007).

8 Cf. Tiffany Field, *Touch* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Tiffany Field, “Touch for Socioemotional and Physical Well-being: A Review,” *Developmental Review*, 30, (2010), 367–383.

do not touch each other. Jacques Fischer-Lokou, a teacher-researcher in social psychology at the University of South Brittany holds that children deprived of touch suffered from significant psychological problems.⁹ Zeanah recounts that there are serious psychological, mental, physical and physiological consequence for abandoned children in an orphanage who receive no proper care.¹⁰

Other studies highlight the importance of touch for everyone's well-being. Touch reduces anxiety. The English psychiatrist John Bowlby points out that physical contact gives an emotional security that soothes tensions and anxieties.¹¹ Here searched on babies who were not properly carried or who did not have enough physical contact with their mothers. By affirming that knowledge of oneself and of the external world passes through touch, Fabienne Martin-Juchat, a researcher in the anthropology of body and emotions, says that the lack of physical touch led to learning disabilities and a lot of anxiety.¹² The deprivation of touch due to the health crisis will probably have consequences on our bodies, even if we cannot see them in the short term. For a long period of time, the current measures will strongly impact our behaviours especially in the public space.

2.1 Development of Haphephobia, fear of touching or being touched?

One of the consequences of deprivation of touch could be the development of haphephobia. For months, our gestures have faced a certain restraint, which could cause the appearance of a "tactile inhibition" in some people, according to Bernard Andrieu, French philosopher of the body. We forbid ourselves to touch the other not by politeness, but by fear. Now, we are really in a visceral fear: we cannot control it, unlike other phobias, such as the fear of flying or the fear of being next to such a person.

For Bernard Andrieu, this phobia of touch will remain after the end of the health crisis. He holds that even with the vaccine, there will always be this fear of touch or being touched. On the contrary, for David Le Breton, professor of sociology at the University of Strasbourg this is only a form of adjustment

9 Cf. Nicolas Guéguen and Jacques Fischer-Lokou, "Another Evaluation of Touch and helping Behavior," *Psychological Reports*, 92, 2003, 62–64.

10 Charles H. Zeanah, "Disturbances of attachment in young children adopted from institutions," *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 21, (2000), 230–236.

11 John Bowlby, "A Secure Base: Parent-child Attachment and Healthy Human Development" (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

12 Fabienne Martin-Juchat, *L'aventure du corps: La communication corporelle, une voie vers l'émancipation* (Fontaine: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2020).

to circumstances and perhaps for a while we will remain a little suspicious of touch, but we will very soon find ways to interact physically with others.

2.2 Reinvention of Physical Contact

Faced with this possible fear of touch, there will be more distance between people, we will even be careful after the pandemic not to get too close to other people, says Jacques Fischer-Lokou. Since touch will be less present in the public space, intimate spaces will be recreated automatically, where other possibilities of touch will be reinvented, asserts Fabienne Martin-Juchat. We can feel touched other than by physical contact, for example by sublimation by projecting ourselves into a dreamlike universe through literature or films and let ourselves be touched through various experiences.

Enclosed spaces within communities could also be reinforced to promote fearless touch. Bernard Andrieu evokes the establishment of homogeneous and closed communities, a kind of social fence, for a certified touch. We will remain between certifiable and controllable people, with labels and possibility of being traced. We will be asked to show PCR test before we come in proximity with others. According to him, it is necessary to re-elaborate the contact, rethink the proximity, the caress, the massage and the body language. It is possible that we realize that we have a body that can communicate differently than through direct touch. However, there is a danger of these “certified touch” communities degrading our social relationships and promoting exclusion and discrimination against other people.

3 Acceleration of Biopower

On the occasion of the current pandemic, we note with astonishment and concern that the great fear is clearly now a dehumanized corporeity, a biological life at the mercy of institutional or political decisions. In India, illegalized people, the poor, migrant labourers, the slum dwellers and the homeless obviously remain at the top of the discernment of bare life. This bare life certainly means that one does not die, but it does not allow one to live in the full sense of the term, especially if one remains in the isolated state. This means that one is denied access to a bio-psycho-social life. On the contrary, having the obsession not to die does not help to live, since to live is to know and accept that human life is moral. It is indeed the existential awareness of our mortality that helps us to live.

Foucault recalls that in the ancient regimes, kings, emperors and princes had a right of life and death over their subjects when they had become dangerous

to their power. The sovereign at least had the right to deprive their bodies of freedom, that is, to lock them up, to imprison them, to exile them, to banish them. Apart from these exceptional situations, the sovereign did not particularly care about the bodies of his subjects and let them live as they pleased provided that they pay the tax and that they go to war when asked. With modernity, the notion of population appears. A population made up of living bodies whose political power cares about health, hygiene, birth rate, mortality and progeny.¹³ This is the emergence of biopower.

Obviously, there are positive and beneficial elements in the health concern of people's bodies. Thanks to the health concern that sewers were invented (and they significantly reduced infections), that hygiene rules were advocated and that modern medicine, based on the biological body, was able to develop health care in an incomparable way to treat illness and to ensure longevity and reduction of infant mortality.

The reduction of the body to bare life occurs effectively when a surgeon operates a patient under general anaesthesia. The body temporarily becomes cut off from the patient's sensations, emotions, any conscious link with its libido, psyche or social and political quality. For the sake of the patient's somatic health, his or her body is limited to the bare life and is made available to the surgeon and his team who can immobilize, penetrate the orifices, open, remove, repair, close the organs of the body. When the surgeon speaks with his awakened patient, he will speak to him as a person.

We must recognize the importance of this reduction to bare life, of this necessary violence that excludes any quality other than biological life provided that it does not last, and once the treatment is done the patient is respected in his or her full humanity.

3.1 Thinking beyond Biology

During the first few months of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and at the beginning of the second wave, the management of the pandemic crisis was done around the exclusive and exclusionary notion of bare life, of purely biological body. The advisory board of the Ministry of Health both of the Union Government and of the State Governments in India did not include psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers, members of an ethics committee, and geriatricians. The pandemic crisis was managed exclusively on the virological studies alone. This may well be the case in many

13 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978—1979* (London: Picador, 2010).

governments in the world. Thus, for months, we have lived in the world of *zoe*, plagued by conscious or unconscious anxiety caused by the loss of all other qualities and panic that has stunned the economy and the psychic life of everyone, including the politicians and government officials, often resulting in their aberrant and dehumanizing behaviour. The work of sociologist Alain Desrosières contesting the “statistical argument”,¹⁴ helps us understand the policy options envisaged without the expertise of disciplines such as social sciences, humanities and certain branches in the discipline of medicine.

According to official discourses, there was no option other than to be contaminated or not by the virus: to get sick and die, without the honour of a funeral ritual, to endanger the lives of the loved ones, especially those who are defined senior citizens only by the threshold of 65 years or to be protected from the virus and thus protect others. “Saving lives” is a noble programme, but its ceremonious repetition can become an impasse, a way of no longer thinking about the vital compromise between *zoe* and *bios*, between survival and life.

People who have been sheltered in care home for children, the elderly and those with special needs were reduced to a bare life: it was obvious that no one could visit them normally. This is true of those who were hospitalized for health care. People outside the medical profession do not come to the hospital to see the body reduced to its bare life. No visit to hospitals or care homes was possible; no relationships even among the residents of the neighbourhood was allowed. Participation in the last rites of the members of the family, no funeral and collective tribute, which is synonymous with recognition within a community were forbidden.

3.2 Camp as an Analogy of Biopower

Let us now turn to the metaphor on which Giorgio Agamben relies in his work *Homo Sacer*,¹⁵ where the body reduced to bare life is both the body that appeared to modernity, from the point of view of health and hygiene, and that of the state of exception represented by the concentration camps, which Foucault had not described.

To the question “What is a camp?”, Agamben responds with an epistemological coup: a camp is *not only* the concentration camp of the history of Nazism, or

14 Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2002).

15 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

other regimes, but in a way, it is like the hidden matrix, like the law of the political space in which we still live.¹⁶ It is a disappearance of human as a “political animal” (Aristotle), a disappearance of the transgenerational, a case of anomie. To this extent, the camp is the place where the inhabitants have been stripped of any political status, reduced entirely to their bare lives; this is the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been achieved¹⁷ and I would add that this is exactly what happens in pandemic times.

Whenever the state decides to take direct charge of the biological life of the nation, there is a kind of disjunction between the nation-state of the citizens and the bare life of the population. It is this growing gap between the nation-state and bare life that Agamben calls camp, that is to say a territory struck by a measure of exclusion from civic, social and psychological dignity. In the health context today, we can both be supporters of vaccination on a large scale, because it has eradicated many diseases, and understand that citizens, even nurses or doctors, refuse vaccination in general: this is a way of saying in a way: ‘my body is mine, it is not the State, it is not nationalized, it is not reduced to bare life.’

For Agamben, the political paradigm of the West today is the camp and not the city. We could not assert the relevance of this thesis if we focused our attention on the exercise of the only hot cruelty in the extermination camps, which was animated by the effective desire to kill. But we can consider it if we look at the cold cruelty that is indeed at work in this reduction from life to survival, cold cruelty that has led to what we have mentioned above, in hospitals and covid centres.

The protection of bare life is exclusively placed under the regime of a logic of survival, thus articulated with the dominant principle of bad precariousness as we have seen above: in bad precariousness, it is no longer a question of living but of surviving, without confidence.

Conclusion

Let us try to remain attentive to the signs of the grip of biopower, let us take care of the overall health of everyone, to live, not reducing it to biological bodies, individuals and populations defined exclusively by their vulnerability. Caution remains necessary in the context of a pandemic of this magnitude, but it will be a question of refusing the cognitive apocalypse that accompanies it.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

Political Economy of the Pandemic through Human Silhouettes

Jose D. Maliekal, SDB

Abstract:

This paper entitled, “Political Economy of the Pandemic through Human Silhouettes” is an attempt at delving into the impact Coronavirus pandemic on society, through the optic of political economy. After the introductory remarks and placing the heuristic framework of political economy, with a Senonian slant, the work engages itself in the task of foregrounding the consequences of the human encounter with the pandemic, specifically under the aspects of politicization of the virus, communalization of the virus, the social murder of citizens by the state and the hidden play of capital behind the virus. True to its title, the work eschews itself from statistical jugglery and captures in broad strokes of human silhouettes, the plight of flesh and blood human beings, caught in the nexus between the state and the corporate giants, which have milked the cow of the Coronavirus, at the expense of the poor. The concluding remarks project a few futuristic proposals to tame the Leviathan of neo-liberal capitalism, the real villain behind the play of the virus.

Keywords: Political Economy, Epidemiology, Politicization, Communalization, State-Corporate Nexus

Introduction

Nature has always inspired awesome performances and magnificent narratives, whether it presents itself as a deluge, an eclipse, or a tiny virus. Whether it was the great flood, the ice age, or the Black Death, it has shaped history and controlled our imaginations. It is beyond doubt that the corona epidemic is, indeed, complex in nature. It comes across to us, as what the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss named as a total social fact, a concrete event that connects and unfolds the various aspects of a society in its totality.¹ This paper

1 Shiv Visvanathan, “The Problem,” in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 10.

attempts at delving into its impact on society, through the optic of political economy. We will be doing it, specifically under the aspects of politicization of the virus, communalization of the virus, the social murder of citizens by the state and the hidden play of capital behind the virus.

1 Political Economy, under a New Hermeneutical Key

Political economy is an interdisciplinary branch of the social sciences that focuses on the interrelationships among individuals, governments, and public policy. In a wider sense, political economy was once the common term used for the discipline, we now call economics. Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all used the term to describe their theories. It is, therefore, the result of the interaction between politics and the economy. Global political economy studies, how political forces shape global economic interactions. Those who study political economy seek to understand, how history, culture, and customs impact an economic system.²

This optic of political economy has been deployed by Amartya Sen in his approach to economic investigations. For Sen, this natural interdisciplinary perspective of classical political economy is profoundly important for analyzing economic problems, like hunger. Sen, through his 'science of human welfare' has addressed issues like famine and endemic hunger, rampant poverty and growing unemployment, and population explosion and the phenomenon of countless missing women.³ In this article, that attempts at capturing the impact of Coronavirus, on the everydayness of the citizens of India, we follow this slant towards political economy.

2 Politicization of Coronavirus by the State

Politics, citizenship and livelihoods went into a deep freeze when the Prime Minister of India, Mr Narendra Modi gave the diktat at 08.00 p.m. on March 24, 2020 announcing a national lockdown with four hours' notice. As middle-class Indians shut themselves at home, and many in North India banged pots and pans from their balconies in keeping with the prime ministerial edict, there were those balcony-less Indians, in the dark underbelly of India, who started a long march to their pastures, fields and hutments in the villages. We called them the 'migrants' – these people who had travelled to cities and towns to supplement shrinking incomes due to agrarian and rural distress.

2 Will Kenton, "Political Economy," <file:///C:/Users/DELL/Desktop/Political%20Economy%20Definition%20-%20Investopedia.html>, accessed on 14 July, 2021.

3 Jose Maliekal, *Standstill Utopias: Dalits Encountering Christianity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2017), 2-3.

The greatest reverse migration in history had begun in Delhi. They were seen moving in their hundreds, thousands and millions, on foot. Their survival instinct told them to walk home or perish. Paradoxically, theirs was a stoic march of/in/for the human dignity, which they had been denied, in their existence as shadow citizens, in India's national capital and other cities.⁴

Going over the trajectory of the response of the state machinery to Coronavirus, it could be noted that the seriousness of the impact of a virus with the potential to become a 'pandemic', was barely acknowledged until the prime minister's 'special' address to the nation, asking 1.4 billion people to lock themselves down. In encountering the virus, the Government of India had made a big mistake in strategizing as if for war. Wars need adversaries and enemies.⁵ A tiny powerful think tank loyal to the ruling party, operating through the politics of power, perception, identity, and group loyalties, had naturally looked to perpetuate the inequalities it was at home with. It is not surprising, therefore, that the government even used the virus and the arms of the state to ascribe ridiculous identities to the virus – of religion, class, caste, and region and strengthen the prejudices it thrives on. The panic in individual and collective consciousness weakened the resolve of most citizens to confront the state and its dictatorial pronouncements. The citizen became a 'subject' for a policy of trial and error in the chaos that has ensued.⁶

For vast multitudes of people, the lockdown came as a set of drastic, unquestionable orders, backed by centralized command and control, and the aggressive use of two laws (The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and the Disaster Management Act, 2005), to essentially put all controls in the hands of the central government's Home Ministry and a small team operating under it. The language and imagery of 'war' was invoked, with chains of command similar to what the armed forces follow at the time of war, curtailing the freedom of citizens. The Epidemic Diseases Act (1897) and the Disaster Management Act (2005) began to be used as instruments in a battle between the state and the people. By forcibly restricting people from being where they felt most secure, the central government might as well have suspended Article 19(1) of the Constitution, and the freedoms enshrined within.

4 Saba Naqvi, "Covering the remains of the day during the lockdown," *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 66 -67.

5 For an enlightening analysis of the different metaphors deployed in encountering Coronavirus, and the weaknesses of the "War Metaphor" vis-à-vis Coronavirus, see Bonaventura De Sousa Santos, "Metaphors in Progress," in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 22-24.

6 This abridged account of the politicization of virus, has been inspired by Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dev, "A Virus is Politicized," in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 42 – 48.

The statement of ‘stay at home and stay safe’ was an irony for anyone except the upper-middle class and the elite, the balconied India. For the labourers, staying home meant living in overcrowded houses, slums, work premises, in urban areas, or in small domestic spaces in rural India. Physical distance necessary for remaining free from Covid-19 was also intrinsically linked to privilege. In fact, by living at home, the workers were divorced from their occupation, employment, wages and daily livelihood. As soon as the lockdown was declared, there was widespread panic and scrambling for procuring food and supplies. There were also many stories of hunger and starvation.

The lockdown has repeatedly shown us the how little India’s policy-makers and so-called educated classes knew about the vast numbers of informal (unorganized) workers – 94% of India’s workforce. These workers were the backbone of the Indian economy, responsible for decades of high growth rates. They were also invisible, unrecognized, disrespected, and were workers without rights. The panic of huge establishments in ever being able to recall workers, who had left, resulted in the draconian labour law related ordinances being promulgated by some states like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and even Congress ruled Rajasthan. All that neoliberal India wanted was to make sure that these people were available to go back to work and revive growth and the economy.

The circulatory labour force migrates to cities because of poverty, unemployment, caste violence, landlessness, corporate land grabs and other factors. Of the 395 million intra-state migrants in India, 62 million are estimated to be Dalits and 31 million Adivasis. On their return they faced diluted labour laws and longer working hours. To make matters worse, they were stigmatized as carriers of the virus, as they reached home in search of social security and a sense of belonging. Oppressed already both by class and caste, discrimination against migrant labour, daily wage workers, factory and informal sector workers, is further entrenched by downgrading their rights and protections. The lockdown laid bare how poorly labour laws had been implemented all these years. Instead of assuring proper implementation and enhanced labour rights, governments like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and others have passed ordinances and amendments, practically removing even the fig leaf of protection that existed for workers. Similar changes have been made by the Centre and many states on environmental protection. It is crucial that our approach of a welfare state within a constitutional democracy ensures that the private sector and private employers respect the rights of labour, and make sure that the social security needs of people, including access to employment on

at least minimum wages, is ensured. National quarantine policies represent a mortal threat to small enterprises reliant on migrant labour. Small businesses, with no workers, cannot produce, and face a decimation of demand for goods and services. ‘Flattening the curve’ through nationwide quarantine and systemic suspension of economic activity represents a set of policies formulated by transnational technocrats and for elites who have access to critical care and could continue to work from home. It is thus the product of an elitist technocratic mentality that ignores the livelihoods of workers and employers.⁷

The Coronavirus pandemic has brought to the fore not only a health crisis on a scale not seen since the Spanish Flu (1918), but also a crisis of democracy. At the core of this democratic crisis sits unattended health, economic and social issues magnified to impose controls but unaddressed in real terms. The priority of the government has been to seize every opportunity to centralize power, and increase the opacity and arbitrariness in governance/decision-making. Even the rhetoric of ‘PM Cares’ is exposed by the fact that it is a national fund hidden from institutional scrutiny even of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), and a self-proclaimed immunity from the Right to Information (RTI). A series of charitable efforts to feed migrants and those affected by these calamities have come under the scanner for no other reason than the identity of the people so benefited is that of minorities or the poor. The orders issued by the Government of India had to be strictly followed. Federal structures were sidestepped. It is only when it became clear that the central government actually had no answers and were unwilling, or unable to provide the resources needed to act that matters were turned over to the states to do what they could. This left little scope for building a decentralized, synergetic approach for dealing with any issue of governance including the execution of the total lockdown – perhaps the largest ever administrative orchestration in human history.

3 Communalization of the Virus

A gathering of thousands at the Tablighi Jamaat’s Delhi headquarters in March was found to be the biggest ‘super-spreader’ of Corona virus in India. The religious order had gathered people with a history of foreign travel in their headquarters in Delhi. In the age of Corona virus, faith groups and religious congregations did indeed spread the infection, be they Hindu, Christian or Muslim. But the consequences of the Tablighi outbreak were

⁷ Adnan Naseemullah, “Small Business and India’s Elitist Political Economy,” in *Seminar* 734 (October, 2020), 32.

dreadful for the world's third largest Muslim population, mostly employed in the unorganized sector and reeling from the lockdown as all workers were. At a time when people were scared of the unknown, they settled for hating the known enemy even more than before. Some hospitals in North India began refusing admission to Muslims. Other hospitals in Gujarat segregated Muslims into a separate ward and after an outcry, denied having done so. A legislator of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh was found advocating a boycott of Muslim business. And TV anchors and networks set about stoking all the subliminal prejudices and speaking in a language that almost seemed to advocate genocide. Just preceding the lockdown and the gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, there were vicious communal riots in northeast Delhi from 23 to 26 February, 2020. These riots themselves were the outcome of rage against protests that were taking place at several sites in the national capital, where women and students were congregating at sit-ins against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that gave refugee status to people of all faiths except Islam.⁸

Under the majoritarian, cultural nationalistic metanarrative of the *Hindu Rashtra*, one can understand the epistemological framework of the Indian Muslim, over against the Muslims of India. Indian Muslim is conflated with terrorism and Pakistani Muslims and this portrait continues to haunt the tumultuous political terrain of India. The totalizing narrative of the *Indian Muslims*, as opposed to the Muslims of India, is like the White Man's Indian or the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Muslims as belonging to the past, frames the Hindutva imaginary that is required to make India into a *Hindu Rashtra*.⁹ The imagery of the Tabliquis as super spreaders is nested in this imagery of the Indian Muslim, in the psyche of the New India, in the making, driven by the majoritarian agenda of the *Hindu Rashtra*.

There is the hermeneutical code of alter-referentiality in othering the Muslims of India, as the Indian Muslim, that is, *encoding* the other in order to constitute the self through a constant process of negation. Hence, the images that concretize who the Indian Muslim is – an image of the Muslim, the

8 Naqvi, "Covering the remains of the day during the lockdown," 69 -70.

9 Misria Shaik Ali, "The Spectre of Indian Muslims in India's Covid Experience," in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 82. The imagery of the Love Jihad is also constructed along the same lines of the parochial, pre-modern and savage and perverse Muslim man, from whom, the Hindu and Christian women should be protected. This is similar to Fanon's analysis of back man, under the subjugation of the White Man. In the context of the Indian Muslims, both the Muslim Man and the Hindu Women, who indulged in Love Jihad, are subjugated by the patriarchal order of Hindutva.

terrorist and the invisible presence unified into a monolith that continues to haunt the securitarian imaginary of partitioned India in an attempt to establish India as a *Hindu Rashtra*. The anxiety of the invisible Coronavirus acquires a manifestation using the concrete image of the Tabliqi. The behaviour of the Tabliqi Jamat, as the super spreader is dislocated from the matters of civil responsibility and located in the terrain of terrorism. In this way, through alter-referentiality, the spectre of Indian Muslim haunts India's Covid experience. For Derrida and Stiegler, spectre is the 'invisible visible' and it is the visibility of the body that is not present in flesh and blood. The pain of being Indian Muslim is being felt in flesh and blood on the roads of the New India that is being established as, or becoming *Hindu Rashtra*, as in the case of the Muslims being lynched by the Gowrakshaks.¹⁰ In this way, the 'spectre' of the Indian Muslim 'is already constituent of the material reality of Hindu Rashtra and has material effects that shape the presents and the futures of Muslims of India, their multiple and varied life worlds and livelihood, and the belongingness to the lands they occupy.'¹¹

4 Social Murder of the Citizens by the State

When people are placed under conditions which appeal to the brute only, stated Friedrich Engels, what remains to them but to rebel or to succumb to utter brutality? The scenes that were being witnessed in India during the first wave and second wave of Covid-19, were apocalyptic in tone. When a citizen attacks hospital personnel because a life was lost due to the absence of medical care, or a citizen struggles to breathe with an oxygen cylinder on the pavement, it is a crisis at multiple levels. But what is concerning, more than the "collapse of the system" or the failure of the state, is the shocking discourse among the supporters of the government that it is not responsible for the crisis. This defensive posture has consequences for India's democracy. Engels had argued that the English ruling class and the state had created such horrendous working and living conditions for the workers, without the "necessaries of life", that they suffer not only ill health but meet early deaths. Engels calls this social murder, the same as murder by an individual; the only difference is that this murder is "disguised", for "no man sees the murderer" and the death appears to be a "natural one". What we were seeing around, as

10 See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, "Spectographies," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghost and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsberry Academic, 2013), 37-52.

11 Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai," in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghost and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsberry Academic, 2013), 151 -74.

part of Covid-19 scenario, reflective of state callousness and apathy, in our inability to make the state accountable, is social murder.¹²

In the first wave of the pandemic in India, the tragic plight of millions of inter State migrant labour walking thousands of kilometres, remained invisible. That was a classic case of social murder. And it was justified then as well in narratives which argued that, after all, it was the responsibility of the workers themselves for ‘voluntarily’ undertaking such a journey. Just as it is the responsibility of the people themselves for causing the second wave. Yet, ironically, when the successful defeat of Covid-19 was celebrated in February by an official resolution of the Bharatiya Janata Party, it was the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that was given credit, not the people. When ordinary people, without access to expert advice, are asked to own up to their mistakes, powerful actors such as the Election Commission of India holding an eight-phase election in Bengal, the Uttarakhand Chief Minister justifying the Kumbh mela and the Prime Minister exulting about the size of an election rally crowd in West Bengal on a day when over 2,00,000 Indians were newly infected by the novel Coronavirus, are all unassailable actions of the state. By participating in the state’s abdication of responsibility, one was fostering conditions of social murder.¹³

In the last seven years, the Indian state has acquired distinct tendencies of what sociologist Max Weber has called patrimonialism in which the ruler exercises a traditional form of authority which rests on the “sanctity of immemorial traditions”, in contrast to a rule based on a rational legal bureaucracy or impersonal rules. But unlike in ideal typical patrimonialism, this highly personalised and centralised form of rule is not based on heredity, kinship ties or personal allegiances, rather on the ideology of religious majoritarianism as well as nationalism, and legitimised by election wins. Duty, patriotism, etc., become keywords here as was tellingly witnessed during the misery unleashed by demonetisation. Ironically, this patrimonial government, which prided itself as a ‘mai-baapsarkar’, the dispenser of benevolence towards subjects, overnight transforms itself into one which asks citizens to fend for themselves, whether it is by procuring oxygen cylinders, or arranging ambulances. This has resulted in a Social Darwinism in which only the most powerful have some chances of survival. As scholars identify, one of the fundamental problems in patrimonialism is ensuring accountability, something that becomes stark during a pandemic when the patrimonial state goes missing.¹⁴

12 Nissim Mannathukkaren, “Social Murder and the Missing State,” in *The Hindu*, May 7, 2021, 8.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

Thithi Bhattacharya had this to say on the Covid-19 crisis in India. Two images booked the current crisis and contain in them a trajectory of the crisis, like fault lines. The first is the telling image of the Indian police hosing down migrant workers with bleach last spring, during the first wave of the pandemic, and the grimmer, more recent one of cremation fires burning all over the country. The road between the two markers was expected, but the violence lies in the fact that it could have been avoided. It was an example of a perfect marriage between Hindutva and capitalism. Hindutva assured the government that the virus was over, while capitalist greed monetized a global pandemic.¹⁵

The lifesaving vaccine is available for free in almost all countries of the global North, in India it is not. The Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine maker, is currently the chief manufacturer of the vaccine in the country. In January they sold the first 100 million doses of the vaccine to the Indian government at a 'special price' of 200 rupees (\$2.74) per dose, after which they raised the price. On the private market the vaccine is being sold for 1,000 rupees (\$13.68) per dose.¹⁶

Adar Poonawalla looked at the situation of the devastating global pandemic last year and decided that it was his moment to make a killing. In his interview with international media, Poonawalla emphasized that he was going to "take the risk and become a front-runner." The usual suspects jumped on this bandwagon of turning public health emergencies into private profit. The Melinda and Bill Gates foundation invested \$150 million, while the vampiric firms of Goldman Sachs, Citi and Avendus Capital became SII's chief advisors. Like all elites from the global south trained well in neoliberal speak, Poonawalla declared his lofty anticolonial goal to be the supply of "A majority of the vaccine, at least initially... to our countrymen before it goes abroad." In reality, nearly 80 percent of SII's went abroad for a steep profit, till the Indian government finally forced a ban on exports as

15 Tithi Bhattacharya, "Turning a Profit from Death: On Modi's Pandemic Response in Neo-Liberal India," in *Spectre*, May 3, 2021, <https://spectrejournal.com/turning-a-profit-from-death/> accessed May 3, 2021.

16 *Ibid.* In this context, see the enlightening contributions by Upendra Baxi, "Rein in Profiteers," in *Indian Express*, May 12, 2021, wherein he calls upon the fellow-citizens and the government, to resist the free and avaricious reign of embedded ideology of 'disaster' or 'toxic' or 'vulture' capitalism, which tries to milk the cow of the Covid-19 pandemic, by fleecing the poor, engaging themselves in hoarding, black marketing and arbitrary pricing of medicine and medical accessories, in an unholy nexus between the pharma companies and corporate medical facilities.

the death count began to rise. The lineaments of this capitalist macabre soon revealed themselves. Cyrus Poonawalla's wealth rose 85% in 5 months. And as the smoke from funeral pyres began to darken Indian skies, in late March, Adar Poonawalla signed a deal to rent a London mansion for a record \$70,000 a week.¹⁷

While absent from any life-making work, such as healthcare or education, the state has been all too present in death-making, from the Gazafication of Kashmir to erecting detention camps for Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis. The healthcare sector told a similar story of predation. According to the BMJ, today, India has just 0.8 doctors and 0.7 hospital beds per 1000 population and is the third largest military spender in the world, after the United States and China. But not everyone was left without healthcare. The private healthcare industry exploded under Neoliberalism, with the country ranking among the top 20 countries for its private healthcare spending, while being amongst the lowest for spending on public health.¹⁸

Austerity, as Ruthie Gilmore teaches us, is the "organized abandonment" of life and life-making paired with "organized violence." The closing of schools and hospitals and the expansion of prisons and defence budgets hold a mirror to each other. Austerity, however, merely amplifies what is a key organizing principle of capitalism, the lowering of the value of human life. While capitalism strives to lower the value of labour power in order to increase surplus value, what this means concretely for the working class is, following Rosemary Hennessy's concept of abjection, what we might call the manufacture of abjection. This mechanism goes beyond the *economic* effort of lowering wages. Indeed, wages are mostly effectively lowered when capital can successfully lower the parameters of social reproduction of life and labour power. Social oppressions such as race, gender, and caste are some of the key drivers for lowering social reproduction.¹⁹

Almost all the mortuary staff in crematoriums and burning ghats are from Dalit or Bahujan communities, whose average monthly pay is around \$134. They are working round the clock, without any PPE, providing last rites, grief counselling and consolation to families who in life would have probably advocated for their continued ritual segregation from elite society. Bezwada Wilson, an organizer for the rights and welfare of sanitation workers,

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

told *VICE World News*, “No one knows how many cremation workers have tested positive for this deadly disease and no one knows how many have died as a result. It is because government officials don’t see the cremation workers and sanitation workers as human.”²⁰ The dead demand that mystical veils of inscrutability be ripped from history, for beneath them lie the banally obvious explanation for this carnage: *capitalism*.²¹

5 The Hidden Play of the Capital behind the Virus

Taking ahead the insights of Tithi Bhattacharya, in the foregoing section, on the role of capitalism, in the carnage that is corona, in this section, I intend dwelling on the play of the neo-liberal capitalism, behind the spread of the Corona Virus, leading to the present pandemic, and several other outbreaks of deadly diseases. Towards this, I bank on the insights of George Wallace, the internationally acknowledged epidemiologist and his colleagues who raise a critique of the capitalist mode of production. Wallace has also researched into the spillover of some of the deadly infections of our time, including Covid-19, Ebola, Zika and swine flu (H1N1 flu). He has produced extensive research output on how big farms, free trade agreements, global capital circuits and deforestation cause “Big Flu and other deadly pandemics.”²²

Extractive capitalism is finding its way into the last of the rainforests and savannahs, anywhere, really, that hasn’t been looped into a circuit of production. And where global capital finds resistance, it turns the state on those indigenous people and smallholders who resist. One thinks of Operation Green Hunt [in Chhattisgarh], and bauxite in the hills of Odisha. As a result, the world is ringed by a daisy chain of these regional circuits of production. Each circuit typically runs from the deepest forest through the peri-urban continuum to a local regional capital. Monoculture agriculture, mining and logging gouge the circuit along the way. The people living there are pushed out or proletarianized into cheap labour. At forest edges subjected to development, what geographers

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.* Also see Manoj V. George and Resmi P. Bhaskaran, “We Must Ensure Dignity to the Departed,” in *Indian Express*, June 18, 2021, where the authors advocate legal backing for the dead body management protocol, given the fact that during the second wave of Covid-19, the dead were not given dignity and their stories denied hearing for the future.

22 Jipson John and Jiheesh P. M., “The Political Economy of Pandemics: Interview with Rob Wallace, evolutionary biologist and Public health Phylographer,” in *Frontline*, July 2, 2021, 4. See in this context, the two contextually relevant works by Wallace. *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and Nature of Science* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016) and *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of Covid-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018).

call the “neoliberal frontier”, novel zoonotic pathogens are spilling over out of previously marginalised reservoirs of wild hosts into local livestock, wild food animals and the farm workers or wranglers who tend them. Previous ecologies that marginalized these pathogens to a select few hosts are unplugged and then reconnected in such a way that the pathogens have new exits out through the circuit of production they did not have before.²³

The establishment scientists are at the beck and call of the neo-liberal capital in cleaning up messes left behind by the sources of their funding. From corporations to the governments that service them, the centres of power are intent on grabbing the last of the undeveloped landscapes from poor people and wild ecologies alike. Establishment scientists, turn to blaming indigenous groups and small farmers and their land use practices. That is, the scientists are punching downward on the weak and powerless, for the sake of their professional survival.²⁴

Healing the rift between ecology and the economy driving diseases and climate damage at the heart of modern agriculture involves imprinting a different political philosophy upon the landscape. We have to let forests work for us in their natural succession, padding pathogens in the complexity of ecological relationship we should avoid disrupting. We can still appropriate resources from nature to survive. But we should retire from expropriating nature to our very extinction.²⁵

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to foreground the political economy of Covid-19 pandemic, under the four aspects of politicization of the virus, communalization of the virus, the social murder of citizens by the state and the hidden play of capital behind the virus. The exercise has brought into relief, how borders, mobility and crossings, which are metaphors for our everyday existence, took on real flesh and blood, through the dialectical actions and processes initiated by actors, human and institutional, both powerful and with less power. The pandemic has enabled us to look at these metaphors anew, to read the structural effects occasioned by Covid-19. We can identify two logics in the emergent responses in the processes unleashed by the pandemic: One is the neoliberal governance thematic which prioritizes economy over people; and the other is the populist logic that hierarchizes or divides the population on

23 *Ibid.*, 11-12.

24 *Ibid.*, 17.

25 *Ibid.*, 19.

racial, ethnic lines to institutionalize a graded arrangement of citizenship using fear and withholding rights. These two sometimes coalesce to produce massive transformations of space, place, and territory generating developments and unevenness. The emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic has overturned one of the logics in many ways. The outbreak has shifted the attention from the economy to the people. This shift is temporary, messy and episodic. Yet, the shift is a reversal of a well entrenched neoliberal logic that valued profit over people. The reversal was palpable in the rising significance of public health workers, doctors and nurses, whose values are not fully recognized in the market or even in popular opinion.²⁶

Yet, this reversal from economy to people has had its limit indeed, as our analysis has shown. The neo-liberal capital has been the villain of the tragic drama of the Covid-19 pandemic, showing itself in its new avatars of disaster capitalism, vulture capitalism and philanthropocapitalism.²⁷ As the French Economist Thomas Piketty's extensive research into political economy has shown, capitalism should not be eaten raw, meaning, capitalism, like sausage, is meant to be cooked by a democratic society and its institutions because raw capitalism is antisocial.²⁸ As Piketty warns, "A market economy... if left to itself... contains powerful forces of divergence, which are potentially threatening to democratic societies and to the values of social justice on which they are based."²⁹ We have to be co-present to the virus and listen to it, to draw lessons for our future course of action. The virus is in fact as human as can be, with a humanity that is radically *other* than the humanity we attribute to ourselves. The signs sent out by the virus are no longer opaque but rather transparent, if we bear in mind that the human being who now is getting infected by it is the same person who has been infecting and abusing nature for centuries. The two processes are tightly interwoven.³⁰

The alternative narrative for the future calls for a new social contract between science and society that will strengthen democratic elements such as robust educational processes fostering scientific temper, respect for independent scientific advice, responsible innovation, listening to citizens' identification of

26 Sarasij Majumder, "Reflections on Capital, Identity and the Corona Conundrum," in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 76 -77.

27 Baxi, "Rein in Profiteers."

28 Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 47.

29 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 571.

30 Santos, "Metaphors in Progress," in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 26.

societal challenges, recognition of minority knowledge systems and a stronger sense of cognitive justice, and investing in a pro-poor way, in public health, thereby strengthening our democracies.³¹

As Rob Wallace challenges us to fight the forces of neoliberal capitalism, “The future isn’t written in stone, but it calls upon all of us to meet the historical moment with the bravery and verve and ingenuity it is asking. Not just in response to the geological forces we have unleashed but to the rich and their well-paid minions who, sociopathic as a matter of principle, are prepared to promote and protect capitalism at the cost of the very planet upon which we depend. Are we ready to revolt?”³²

31 Wiebe E. Bijker, “Call for a New Social Contract between Science and Society,” in *Seminar* 733 (September, 2020), 21.

32 Jipson John and Jiteesh P. M., “The Political Economy of Pandemics,” 19.

Novel Coronavirus – a new Locus Cognitus of Philosophy

Victor Ferrao

Abstract:

We cannot philosophize by bracketing coronavirus in the wake of great distress it has inflicted on humanity. Philosophers have the imperative to make the novel virus the new locus classicus for doing philosophy. The new locus cognitus of philosophy can indeed generate responsible, relevant and emancipative responses to the global pandemic and the havoc that it has inflicted on humanity. We raise this all important issue in this study and attempt to seek the dharma of philosophy in the wake of the lethal virus. This study is divided into three parts. The first part tries to broadly understand the impact as well as human response to the global pandemic. We stay largely within the boundaries of philosophy and do not take other important responses that are medical or scientific in this context. The second part of this study attempts to discover the dharma of philosophy in the light of global pandemic. The third part of the study tries to deepen the new dharma of philosophy and strives to suggest that the new mission of philosophy is to produce a hermeneutics of love that will in turn enable us to usher in what we may describe as civilizations of love.

Keywords: *pandemic, dharma, hermeneutics, wisdom, love*

Introduction

We cannot philosophize by bracketing coronavirus in the wake of great distress it has inflicted on humanity. Philosophers have imperative to make the novel virus the new locus classicus for doing philosophy. The new locus cognitus of philosophy can indeed generate responsible, relevant and emancipative responses to the global pandemic and the havoc that it has inflicted on humanity. We raise this all important issue in this study and attempt to seek the dharma of philosophy in the wake of the lethal virus. This study is divided into three parts: The first part tries to broadly understand the impact

as well as human response to the global pandemic. We stay largely within the boundaries of philosophy and do not take other important responses that are medical or scientific in this context. The second part of this study attempts to discover the dharma of philosophy in the light of global pandemic. The third part of the study tries to deepen the new dharma of philosophy and strives to suggest that the new mission of philosophy is to produce a hermeneutics of love that will in turn produce civilizations of love.

1 Global Pandemic and Our World

The global pandemic has brought about a tremendous change in our ways of being-human-in-the-world. We are not fully aware of this transformation. It is important to understand what the virus is doing to us and what we do to respond to it.

1.1 Death of Isolationist totalizing Thinking

The atomist view of the individual and society has been put to death by Covid-19. It has done away isolationist thinking¹ of complete and independent self, and has manifested the broken-ness, finitude and dependence of humanity. Coronavirus has opened a new locus cognitus to philosophy. It has entered the hermeneutical circle of our understanding and has opened a critical self-understanding of our common humanity. It is disrupting our ultra individualist interpretation of being humans-in-the-world. The specters of the virus² are every where and are challenging us to withdraw into isolated life by social distancing, yet paradoxically it manifests our dependence on each other and our utter fragility as humans-in-the-world.³ It may not be forcing a return to traditional communitarianisms⁴ but may summon us to new ways of being human in the world. Our arrogance is steadily dying and kind of despair in the battle against the lethal virus is steadily rising. To come to terms with our predicament, we have to come to understand how the

1 Isolationist thinking is subject centred reason. This kind of reason has reached a dead end. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 62.

2 The specter of virus is notion inspired by the Derrida's book, *Specters of Marx and the State of Debt and the Work of Mourning and the New International*. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx and the State of Debt and the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3 This attention to human finitude link us to the *das ding* of Martin Heidegger. See Martin Heidegger, 'Das Ding' in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske 1954), 171.

4 See Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley and Robert P. Hunt, (Eds.), *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Moral Foundation of Democracy* (Maryland: Rowman and Little Field, 1995), 4-5.

corona-lens of understanding our being-in-the-world is influencing us and summoning us into new people.⁵

1.2 Interpellation of the novel Virus

The novel virus is calling us into being. It says ‘hey you!’ This addressability⁶ of humanity is profoundly important to understand what it is doing to our being-in-the-world. It is indeed standing between our life and death. The fact that we do not have medical ways of combating it has multiplied its specters in our society and produced great fear. It has marked the way we see ourselves and others. Every human is placed in a precarious condition of being both a victim and a vector of the lethal infection produced by the virus and is influencing the way we treat ourselves and others.

Fear of the virus seems to have got the worst out of us and we have lost all compassion to the point of forgetting our common humanity. We all have natural fear of death, and when the source of death becomes certain as well hidden it brings in a factor of uncertain certainty and therefore, it becomes complex. This is why something new has happened to us. The proximity and distance of the virus has disrupted our social boundaries and we are left confused, afraid and self-deluded. This is why it is important to discern and understand how coronavirus is actively mediating life for us. We need this reflection because our responses to our condition of great distress are often immediate and inadvertent.

2 The Specter of Virus Mediating Life

The paradox is that the virus is both immediately present as well as absent. Its presence has to be discerned through special medical tests. But we have been fighting it by blindly firing into the bush believing that the game is in it. We have no other option. We follow what may be called precautionary principle.⁷ But this fight has brought about a sense of immediacy of the virus and every other person and place than began to look to be a potential carrier of virus. Thus, it is beyond doubt that the specter of virus mediates our life and being-

5 Deleuze and Guattari teach that ideas, art and philosophy can summon new peoples into being. See Stephen Zepke, ‘Anita Frick: Contemporary Painting as Institutional Critique’ in Stephen Zepke and Simon O’Sullivan, (Eds.), *Deleuze and Contemporary Art* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2010), 63.

6 Our addressability take inspiration from the work of thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas as well as Luis Altusser.

7 See Timothy O’Riordan and James Cameron, (Ed.), *Interpreting the Precautionary Principle* (New York: Earthscan, 2009).

in-the-world. Our seeing and being-in-the-world is stained by the bias of virus. Life is never bias free.⁸ We need lenses or prejudices to understand the world. Becoming aware of these pre-understandings that we bring to bear upon events, persons, places, things, etc., can indeed assist us to free ourselves from the enslavements to some of them that produce toxicity in us. We may already understand how the specter of the virus has produced a guiding lens that pours toxicity out of us. The virus has called us into being and we have submitted to its address and have become transformed people. This is why it is important to make the virus the locus cognitus of philosophy today. The virus does mirror the way we have changed for worse. Perhaps, it is time to seek new ways of being-humans-in-the-world rediscovering our common humanity.

2.1 Our Responses to the Specter of Virus

We may begin this critical reflection by discerning how we project our self into the stream of life that we see as tainted by the lethal virus. It may reveal to us that in the interest of self protection we have become inhuman and behaved monstrously with others. A critical distance⁹ opened by our reflection can manifest how we have responded to the summons of the virus. It has called unto us and said 'hey you!' Moved by fear of death, we have become new people. Pandemic is a time to understand how fear of death mediates life. Before the pandemic, fear of death was minimal. Today, it is not the same. It is only through critical distanciation that marks the distance to let us see, how we project ourselves into the stream of life that we might be able to bite the bullet that challenges us to open our eyes and arrive at a life transforming critical awareness. This life transforming awareness will not allow the virus to cripple the humanity within us. It will enable us to rediscover our common humanity and will produce new ways of being-human-in-the-world. These new ways has the power of transforming us into new people who will care for one self as well as that of others. For the moment, we are locked into 'self care alone' induced by the fear of virus. It can change. We can initiate this change where the self care includes care of the other. Indeed, the truth is we can only save us from the virus by saving each other. This means the rich and the

8 We are never detached neutral observers of the drama of life unfolding around us. We are immersed into it in different degrees. The Philosophical Hermeneutics of H. G. Gadamer clearly drives it home. See Soren Juul, *Solidarity in Individualized Society: Recognition, Justice and Good Judgement* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 26.

9 Distancing is a kind of bracketing of Edmund Husserl. Paul Ricoeur opens it that which is put in the bracket to a detached dispassionate scrutiny to the degree possible. See Leslie MacAvoy 'Distanciation and Epoche the influence of Husserl on Ricoeur's Hermeneutics', in Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallee, (Eds.), *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur: Between Text and Phenomena* (AG Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2016), 15.

powerful can save themselves only by saving the poor. The faster we realize this truth, better will be our response to the global pandemic.

3 The Dharma of Philosophy and the Novel Virus

The lethal virus challenges us to shift the dharma of philosophy. Letting the novel virus become the locus classicus of philosophizing has the power to open us to the new dharma of philosophy.

3.1 Making the Virus Locus Cognitus to Philosophy

Philosophy as love of wisdom has tremendous task in the wake of novel coronavirus. Does philosophy have to change to respond to the disruptive virus? What could be our real philosophic concern, when we let the virus become the locus cognitus of philosophizing? Our predicament in the face of global pandemic is underlining in bold letters our radical thrownness in-the-world.¹⁰ The virus has entered our facticity or given-ness¹¹ and we cannot escape its specters. We are completely immersed into it and there is no turning back. It now belongs to the way we live as humans-in-the-world.

Paradoxically, it plays an enabling role like our thrownness in the world. It offers us new possibilities of thinking, being and philosophizing. In Immanuel Kantian terms, it has become a condition of possibilities.¹² This is why philosophy has opportunities to take leaps¹³ into new modes of thinking and philosophizing. We can, indeed, transform the curse of the global pandemic into a blessing. The new and creative ways of thinking and being will arrive only on the wings of prejudice introduced by the lethal virus. We have to follow the hermeneutical circle to arrive at our new destinations of thinking and being-in-the-world. In some way, the virus has begun to belong to us as we are already soaked into the prejudice or presuppositions introduced by it. The road ahead is open and plural. We do not have to be haunted by a disturbing question: will it produce anarchy of thought? The virus has disrupted our being and thinking. It is the task of philosophy to try and bring an integration of our being-in-the-world.

10 See Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury 2013), 212.

11 Ibid., 71-72.

12 See Arthur W. Collins, *Possible Experience: Understanding Kant Critique of Pure Reason* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

13 Søren Kierkegaard indicates that there are two types of leaps: dialectical leaps and pathos-filled leaps. He lays his emphases on the later. Given our precarious condition, we seem to be driven towards pathos-filled leaps. See Alastair Hannay, 'Equality and Association', in Daniel W. Conway, *Søren Kierkegaard: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 134.

3.2 Moving towards Examined Life

The presuppositions of the virus have both opened and closed our horizons of being and thought. This is why a critical awareness of the modes in which it mediates life to us is of great importance. We cannot be fully conscious of as well as completely free from our prejudices. Our attempt to reach a critical distance and awareness of the workings of our prejudice is always a work in progress. We are fully immersed in life and can never fully stand back from it and view it as whole. Total distanciation is not possible for us. We cannot reach this zero point, or God's eye to view our life as a whole. This human finitude has to be factored in as we take up the task of philosophizing in the wake of the lethal virus. Our efforts in this direction can of course broaden our horizons of thinking and being-in-the-world. But the Socratic direction to examine life¹⁴ has to continue. Hence, we may do well to listen to the call of the global pandemic as philosophers. We are addressed by it. We have a task to respond.

The pandemic has introduced enough otherness in our world to put us and our world into question. Our response to it would be based on the traditions that formed and shaped us. We have to let the hermeneutical circle run its course to bring about creative, responsible and relevant responses to the call of global pandemic. This task of tracing our philosophic responses is urgent otherwise, we may have to face the possibility of being prisoners of the caves of modes of thinking and being introduced by the novel virus. We cannot Oedipalize and surrender to these modes of thinking and being. We have the Socratic task of leading humans to a re-examination of life.¹⁵ The mission of a philosopher is prophetic. It has the noble task to let the anti-Oedipus stand up so that we can embrace emancipative ways of being human-in-our-world.

4 Towards a Leap of Openness

The corona moment of humanity forcefully draws our attention to the fact that there is no Alpha point to philosophizing. Like Rene Descartes and his fellow modern thinkers, we do not have to seek for a pure starting point to philosophize. Nor, there is an Omega point to Philosophy. We do not have to seek a final closure of for all philosophizing like G. W. Hegel. We are finite and we do not have God's eye view of meaning and life. We have to come to terms with the absolute barrier that separate us from the divine. This is the message

14 David m. Johnson, *Socrates in Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71-74.

15 *Ibid.*

that comes loud and clear from the global pandemic. We challenged to stop playing God. The global pandemic calls us to a leap of openness and embrace humility before the mystery of life. It is a challenge to become critically and creatively productive. Therefore, the time and place to philosophize is where we find ourselves. Our philosophizing does not need the Omega point because it is always an unfinished event. We cannot arbitrarily fix goals for philosophizing. There cannot be boundaries to it. The open philosophizing that we have to undertake is not turning of the hermeneutical circle to stage a narcissistic return to our home sweet home. It is prophetic and brave to remain in the new horizons opened by the virus. It is a challenge to let the novel and creative become our new home of thought. Being comfortable with radical indeterminacy or uncertainty certainty introduced by the lethal virus is the way forward to philosophy. Therefore, we are challenged to philosophize on the open road without compulsive necessity to build a system of final closures.

4.1 Towards New ways of being People

Letting the novel virus become the site of philosophizing can bring synergy into our philosophizing. It is the challenge to let our rootedness open to the novel and the critical, so that a new liveable *sensus communis*¹⁶ is forged. We have tried to indicate that this liveable *sensus communis* is in our common humanity. Our philosophizing, therefore, has the challenge to call new ways of being people into being. Hence, our readiness to respond to the call addressed to us by the novel virus is important and urgent. We have the imperative to perform in the theatre of philosophy and generate new, critical and emancipative ideas. It is by fusion of our horizons with the new horizon inaugurated by the global pandemic that we can authentically philosophize. Letting the moving hermeneutical circle bring about the fusion of horizons, we can philosophize to make a difference to our world. Perhaps, given the uncertainty certainty that we are faced with, we are even challenged to revisit our understanding of wisdom. Our theoretical nuances of wisdom (*Nous*, *Episteme*, *Sophia*) have to be displaced by practical wisdom (*Phronesis*).¹⁷ The challenge is to let the forgotten practical wisdom energize our philosophizing. This means we have to bring about a fusion of horizons of the theoretical and practical shades of wisdom. Thus, we have the imperative to move from one

16 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_sense accessed on 28/09/2020 or John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis : Vico, Rhetoric and Limits of Relativism* (London: Duke University Press, 1990), 1-3.

17 Joseph Dune, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgement and the Lure of Technique* (Indiana :University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

dimensional love to an integral vision and love of wisdom that opens us the wisdom of love.

5 Living the New Dharma of Philosophy

There is no doubt that the novel virus has brought about a transformation of the dharma of philosophy. The new dharma of philosophy is to philosophize in the horizons of hermeneutics of love.

5.1 Interrelating the Theoretical and the Practical

Aristotle gave great importance to practical wisdom (*phronesis*). He seemed to have kept the theoretical and the practical wisdom in separate realm as he stood for the irreducibility of practical wisdom to its theoretical ally.¹⁸ In the context of the present predicament that faces us with uncertain certainty, we do not seem to have the luxury to separate the theoretical and the practical realms. While asserting their autonomy, our philosophizing has the dharma to manifest that they belong together. This means that there is a hermeneutical circle between the two. The two are certainly autonomous but inter-related. We have the challenge to open the hermeneutical space between the two. One way of opening the hermeneutical circle is to show how philosophy as love of wisdom is challenged to become wisdom of love (*agape*). Aristotle does keep them related while he separates the working realm of the two. He places the theoretical wisdom in the realm of the universal and confines the practical to the contingent locales of deliberations.¹⁹ Thus, practical wisdom becomes prudence that enables a person to apply the universal knowledge in the contingent locales. This means practical wisdom deals with the applicative and is performative in orientation. This is why our focus has to shift from philosophy to philosophizing. Of course no one can philosophize without philosophy. But the fact that we are turning to philosophizing or doing philosophy, we are already turning towards the realm of practical wisdom.

5.2 Taking the Via Creativa and Via Transformativa

We might come to view philosophizing as an ongoing hermeneutical conversation. To philosophize then means to respond to the interpellation of the context that offers us resources and questions to critically think and (un)think. This is exactly the challenge of the novel virus. We are challenged to think and (un)think human predicament in a world afflicted

18 Davide Nicolini, *Practice Theory, Work and Organization: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

19 Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 212.

by the corona virus. The face of a dying human infected by Covid-19 speaks loudly. It shouts in the midst of silence and fear of death and calls us to responsible philosophising(s).²⁰ We can trace in it the dharma of philosophy today. Maybe we have reached a new *aufhebung*²¹ of philosophy. It is sublation that will take philosophizing to several new levels. Such a sublation might lead philosophizing onto *via creativa* that can put our societies on to *via transformativa*. Embracing of this creative and critical *marga* of philosophizing(s) is the response to imperative of the voices from the margin. Such responses have the power of making our philosophizing(s) acts of love generating wisdom of love for our societies and transforming us philosophers into persons of virtue. Philosophizing then is a consequence of response to the imperative of love. This means dharma of philosophy has to have its roots in the hermeneutics of love.

5.3 Seeking the Wisdom of Love

The imperative of love draws us to make the lethal virus and the devastated condition of humanity the locus cognitus of philosophy. Doing philosophy as a way of seeking the wisdom of love, demands the use of hermeneutics of suspicion. Kantian disinterested act is profoundly interested in its disinterest. This is not disinterested way of doing philosophy. This is why the challenge is to transform doing philosophy into a work of love. Maybe be the dharma of philosophy is to become love seeking wisdom of love. May be it is imperative of being an Indian Christian Philosopher today. The practice of this dharma can make us virtuous persons. This *arête* or virtue is *kenosis* or self-giving love. This means practice of philosophy becomes a practice of the hermeneutics of love. Hermeneutics of love invites us to appropriate what Aristotle calls magnanimity (*megalopsychia* or great souledness) with a dash of humility.²² This means our hermeneutics of love adds discernment to the hermeneutics of suspicion.²³ Hermeneutic of love is basically a hermeneutics of trust but it is not a blind trust. It is critical, reflective and philosophical. Therefore, it requires hermeneutics of suspicion. But hermeneutics of suspicion cannot be totalised. It has to be employed critically and responsibly. This is why we need critical discernment to live our drama of love with hope.

20 We might be reminded of Levinasian phenomenology of the Face.

21 *Aufhebung* is a Hegelian term. Here we appropriate it bring about productive leaps that philosophy can reach in the wake of the novel virus.

22 Metropolitan Hilary Dorostolski, *Humility and Pride* (Bloomington: iUniverse LLC, 2010), 10.

23 Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum International, 2009), 59-77.

5.4 Embracing the Hermeneutics of Love

The hermeneutics of trust is also a hermeneutics of hope. This hope is not waiting for a home coming festival. It is *kenotic* and self emptying. It is ready and willing to live with uncertain certainty in our world. We cannot lead the alienation of philosophy from our living human conditions. Our philosophizing is challenged to become a free gifting of ourselves. It cannot be an egology.²⁴ At best, it has to become a hermeneutics of empathy that enable us to dissolve in the object of love. Doing philosophy or philosophizing is kenotic as it challenges us to lose ourselves in the object of contemplation. This self dying attention to the object of contemplation is way of doing philosophy led by the horizons of agapeistic love. This self dying attention has to complete the hermeneutical circle. It has to pour itself to death into the generation of ideas and philosophies that will call people to emancipative and loving ways of being-human-in-the-world. This is why we have to abandon Cartesian 'I-for-myself' hermeneutics that alienates us from God and the created world. Indeed Cartesian hermeneutics leads to self alienation and is a form of egology.

We have to take up the hermeneutics of myself-as-another.²⁵ Thus, having empathized with the other, we can be ready to undergo a further level of kenosis that lives as one-for-another. This I-for-another is not to be understood in the being-with (*mitsein*) in the sense of Heidegger²⁶ but has to be taken in the sense that one takes up responsibility for the other. This life for the other is close to the hermeneutics of one-for-the-other in Levinasian sense.²⁷ This is why my humble suggestion is that ACPI has to embrace the new dharma of philosophizing to bring about a hermeneutics of love. Embracing of this dharma of philosophy will certainly help the coming of the civilization of love in our country. Accepting this dharma we may transform ACPI into a dharamaram (garden of virtues) that will radiate love and think and (un)think ways of love and hate that disturb the peace, happiness, and wellbeing of all Indians, particularly the poor and the excluded.

24 Our philosophizing cannot be a form of egoism. See Theodore de Boer, 'An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy', in Richard A Cohen, (Ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 83-84.

25 Paul Ricoeur manifest the self at its core is made of otherness. There is away a dialectic of the self and the other than the self. This is what makes us original. See Paul Ricoeur, *One Self as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

26 See Daniel O. Dhalstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary*, 37-39.

27 Benjamin C. Hutchen, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Conclusion

The dharma of philosophizing has to lead to the generation of civilizations of love. We can imagine the civilization of love with help of Buddhist notion of boundless sublime state (*appamanna*). Such a boundless sublime state of affairs is a dharmaram of *vidya*, *deepa* that can give us *jyoti* of *jnana* and *karuna*. Perhaps we will have to pay heed to the Buddhists who teaches that true boundless sublime states abounds in love (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekka*)²⁸ so that our philosophizing(s) become an act of love.

28 See Nayanopika Thera, 'The four sublime states: contemplation on love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity', <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html> accessed on 28/09/2020.

Surviving Covid-19: From Alienation to 'New Normals' of Belonging

Keith D'Souza SJ

Abstract:

Philosophically speaking, two movements may characterize the phenomenon of Covid-19, namely, the dialectic or existential tension between alienation and belonging, and the hermeneutical spiral of normalcy-distanciation-'new normalcy'. The dialectic or existential tension between alienation and belonging takes place at different levels or modes of human experience: personal, inter-personal, social, institutional, political, economic, etc. Within each of these modes of experience, we encounter both a sense of alienation and a sense of connection and belonging. The hermeneutical spiral from old to new ways of living begins with an initial rupture of pre- Covid-19 normal existence at various levels. If the circle or spiral—via the rigour and crucible of multiple distanciations—gets completed, then new forms of normalcy are possible, at different levels, or in diverse areas of personal, social, institutional, economic and political life. Covid-19 is an invitation to humanity to redefine and reimagine human life. We are invited to transcend our normal ways of human living, relating and working, and to embrace new ways of being human. In a situation of flux, trans-normal ways of proceeding may seem novel for some time, and the human community may experiment with diverse forms of these new ways, till newer and more acceptable paradigms emerge and gain acceptance. Human beings are creatures of habit, and many new aspects of life will take on the form of 'new normals'. It is hoped that these 'new normal' aspects of human life harbour nourishing aspects of belonging, rather than alienation.

Keywords: *alienation, dialectic, hermeneutical spiral, distanciation, new normals.*

Introduction

This essay is a phenomenological-hermeneutical exercise related to surviving Covid-19 on personal and social fronts. The article will feature descriptive observations and reflective argumentation related to the Covid-19 phenomenon on the one hand, and potential applications and projections stemming from this personal and social experience on the other. The “Great Pause” of Covid-19 has proved to be a major disruption in multiple fields of human endeavour. The entire global community was affected by this phenomenon in one way, or another. The moot question we need to consider is whether we as persons and as a human family have learned anything substantial from this massive rupture. Has this experience compelled us to revise our normal way of being and relating, as persons and communities? Has the alienating experience of Covid-19 propelled us to embrace new and healthier ways of living?

At a personal level, I count myself as one of those fortunate enough to have survived the disease—twice. However, physical survival does not entail the absence of post-effects of the disease, which only time reveals. At the national as well as global level, at the time of the composition of this article, we seem to have largely emerged from the ravages of the disease—though it has resurfaced in some parts of the globe and has become ‘endemic’ in most other parts, even though not as severe. The physical dimension of surviving Covid-19, though, is only one small aspect of the larger lessons one may have learned from the pandemic. As in most other cases, dysfunctional physical conditions (dis-ease) lead to numerous other forms of personal and social disruption.

The first part of the article dwells upon aspects of “alienation” and “belonging” experienced along the trajectory of the pandemic. Instead of these phenomena being experienced statically and uniformly, there was a dynamic interplay or dialectic between these poles of human experience. It was not uncommon for individuals and communities to experience both ends of the spectrum of social relating and connection: from alienation to belonging—at different times, in diverse contexts, and in different degrees of intensity and duration.

The second part of the article will be framed along the lines of a hermeneutical circle or spiral: initially beginning with a sense of “normalcy,” then going through the disruptions of the pandemic, and emerging with “new normals” in various social domains. Some of these new ways of functioning have already become normalized—others have yet to be accepted as new norms of organizational, or relational behavior. The challenge before us is to reimagine new ways of human living that feature aspects of belonging rather than alienation.

1 The Dialectic of Alienation and Belonging

The phenomenon of Covid-19 as it unfolded was a strange blend of both aspects of alienation and belonging—two extreme poles of existential consciousness. Alienation entails a sense of distance or estrangement, a feeling of loss or desolation, a sense of separation, fragmentation or brokenness of normal social relations, etc. Belonging entails a feeling of inclusion and affective consolation, a sense of connection, meaningful participation in friendly and formal social circles, etc. It would be very rare to find individuals and communities that experienced only one of these extreme poles related to Covid-19. For most persons and communities, there was a preponderance of one of these experiences at some time, or the other during the temporal range of the disease—with varying intensity, duration and frequency of occurrence. For many people experiences moved quite often from despair at one end to hope at the other, inpersonal as well as more public narratives.

The “dialectic” between alienation and belonging varied from person to person, community to community and during different times through the range of the pandemic. Attitudinal and policy changes resulting from this dialectic likewise differed widely within the human community. Before tracing preferable or desirable trajectories emerging from this manifold dialectic, we shall outline various aspects of the phenomena of alienation and belonging.

1.1 The Experience of Alienation

The term “rupture” or “disruption” adequately describes the global phenomenon of the pandemic. It put normal social relations and transactions to a quick and long halt, before some semblance of social order could be restored—especially in those parts of the globe that were the worst affected. Even parts of the globe that were not affected severely by the physical tragedy of the disease were affected by the rupture of economic supply chains that were earlier taken for granted.

This global disruption had its existential manifestation in the experience of alienation in various forms. For those who had the disease, one’s body became something alien and unmanageable, often requiring urgent and prolonged medical attention. This was exacerbated in the early phases of the disease, when guesswork seemed to be more prevalent than serious scientific remedial treatment. The pharmaceutical industry did not have the luxury of time to develop standardized and reliable vaccine regimens. This situation was made even more distressing and alienating when individuals, the medical industry

and corporate bodies took advantage of human adversity to reap huge financial profits.¹

Besides the obvious physical manifestations of alienation, there were numerous social examples as well. Those first affected were treated like pariahs, in a similar way in which leprosy patients were treated traditionally all over the globe for centuries. Contracting the disease became a social stigma—as if one was to be held morally responsible for succumbing to it. State scrutinizing and monitoring systems kept track of the movements of those affected, via various compliance mechanisms—in order to limit the spread of the disease. Even those more compassionate found themselves unable to express their concern via physical contact. Patients found themselves relating to medical personnel dressed up like astronauts, in their insulated gear.

Even for those not affected, the disease brought about something almost unimaginable in our world of infinite possibilities: the phenomenon of a “lockdown” or curfew related to almost all public activities. Freedoms normally taken for granted were suddenly withdrawn by political fatwas, in the name of public safety.² Wealth, fame and social connections became almost worthless overnight, as huge swathes of the human family were cloistered within the confines of their homes. For those who did not have much domestic space to spare, this was a very claustrophobic experience, and not surprisingly led to conditions which facilitated domestic violence of various types and degrees—even in materially developed nations with robust legal systems.

Persons, communities and nations that did not have much political and economic clout found themselves at the mercy of others who did. This became very obvious in India, when an immediate lockdown was announced, leaving millions with little, or no plan to salvage their already fragile economic livelihoods. The huge swathes of humanity trekking vast distances to reach their homes—fleeing from hostile urban environments and unfeeling city

1 See Oxfam's “Pandemic profiteers exposed”, in <https://www.oxfam.org/fr/node/13556> (accessed June 2021). Also see LathaJishnu, “Grotesque profits in the time of Covid-19”, in <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/health/grotesque-profits-in-the-time-of-covid-19-78846> (accessed June 2022).

2 See Mika Aaltola, *Understanding the Politics of Pandemic Emergencies in the Time of COVID-19: An Introduction to Global Politosomatics* (London: Routledge, 2022), 237; for a critique of the ways in which the disease has been handled geopolitically. The author points out that, “the more basic the need, the more clearly it should be beyond politics and politicization. The argument is that people's basic physical, social, material, and mental wants and needs have to replace divided and narrow political considerations in the interest of building more prosperous and peaceful polities.”

folk—almost paralleled the graphic images of painful alienation witnessed during the Partition between India and Pakistan. International relations, instead of becoming stronger as we faced a common enemy, seemed to have become more estranged, as the sad underside of humanity was revealed perhaps as never before: communities and nations developed a siege and protectionist mentality—each one fending for oneself and one’s community. This sense of insecurity leading to insularity and protectionism seemed to be all-pervasive, ranging from international to inter-personal concerns and relations.

Another form of alienation was of a spiritual or religious nature. From sophisticated theologians to simple believers, people were perplexed about the nature and meaning of the disease from a spiritual perspective. Related to the often-perplexing conundrum of the “problem of evil,” the pandemic posed a theological challenge as well as an existential crisis of sorts for many believers of different religious traditions. At the practical level, compulsory distancing from one’s religious community and the inability to practice normal religious rituals and ceremonies posed a challenge to both individuals and religious institutions, in terms of the sustenance of faith. If it was not for the rescue of burgeoning internet resources to fill this spiritual void, many more would suffer from emotional anguish stemming from the meaninglessness of the situation, severe social restrictions and dysfunctional domestic relationships brought about by the limiting conditions of the disease.³

1.2 The Experience of Belonging

While there were various forms of alienation experienced during the pandemic, there were also varied manifestations of compassion and care. These helped to counter a common sense of despair and abandonment, and replace these with a sense of communion and a feeling of belonging. This sense of connection and belonging extended to both definite as well as amorphous communities and circles of concern.

At the physical level, what was remarkable all over the globe was the manner in which health care workers offering different skills and possessing diverse levels of expertise responded to the crisis. These health care foot soldiers or frontline Corona warriors demonstrated heroic levels of commitment and risk—often

3 Domestic abuse of various sorts was widely reported during the long phases of the lockdown imposed in different countries. Surprisingly, evidence of domestic abuse was found even in materially developed nations which foreground a comparatively more secular and rights-based ethos and normally enforce strong laws related to domestic violence. See Alex Piquero et al, *Domestic Violence During COVID-19: Evidence from a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis* (Washington D.C.: Council on Criminal Justice, 2021).

placing the lives of the larger community over their own. While there was much experimentation during the early months of the pandemic—and also the resort to unscrupulous medical industry practices—the magnanimous efforts of a vast majority of workers in this field were evident right through the course of the disease. Not having the luxury of time, health care scientists worked under stressful conditions to produce medicines and vaccines to address the crisis in an emergency mode.

Beyond the more immediate and obvious benefaction demonstrated by professionals in this field, numerous other Governmental and non-Governmental agencies responded—each in their own ways—to ameliorate the crippling conditions experienced during this period. Other frontline workers were those who looked after aspects of life which are often taken for granted as well as inadequately compensated for: sanitation workers, those dealing with various types of waste, basic food supply providers, those maintaining a steady supply of electricity, water, and perhaps most importantly, internet connectivity. While there was understandable hesitancy and caution on the part of several individuals, communities and nations—given the severity of, and lack of control over the disease—it was heartening to observe a steady momentum of the desire to emerge from the disease and not be socially paralyzed in its grip.

At the religious or spiritual level too, huge alternative resources to traditional religious spaces—especially online ones—generated inspirational material that kept hope alive. These inspirational and positive resources sprung from within religious traditions and beyond, keeping people connected and hopeful, even though we were compelled to be socially (or rather, physically) distant from each other. At a more personal level, it was inspiring to witness people reaching out to those affected by the disease. The pandemic provided humans the world over an opportunity to relate with those they had otherwise little time for—family members sharing a common and enclosed space, friends new and old, strangers meeting over a dizzying number of online meetings and webinars, etc.

We have highlighted primary aspects of both moments of alienation and belonging. In the personal and collective lives of many, there has been a tension between these two experiential poles. In some instances, this existential tension has been slight, in some it has been lethal, with alienation overcoming, or snuffing out the aspect of belonging. Often this has had to do with the resources and power which individuals and communities have had—except

in some cases when the extent of the dysfunctional power of the disease was too strong for even those with powerful human resources and connections to thwart off suffering and even death.

The challenge before the human community is to learn from this global phenomenon, so that we may move from a more settled and normal way of life towards something that is more salubrious and sustainable for wider swathes of humanity. The pandemic has invited us to engage in various exercises of attitudinal repositioning. The desire to move towards healthier and more inclusive ways of common living is something that needs to take root, if we are to gain in wisdom and grow in harmony from what otherwise seems to be a crippling and disruptive collective human experience.

2 The Hermeneutical Spiral: Towards “New Normals” of Belonging

The term “disruptive innovation” has become a catchword in management circles for some time now. Covid-19 is a classic case of disruption—at a global level. However, has this experience served to lead the human community towards innovation in various aspects of life—especially innovation that has led to integral development and the greater ennoblement of the collective human spirit? While some wholesome changes have taken place more out of a sense of necessity rather than discerned and deliberate policy making, other changes have not gained sufficient traction and have lost their initial appeal. Human beings are socially slow learners, preferring to stick to traditional lifestyles and options, rather than embracing newer modes of living. The challenge is to wisely and consciously choose and adopt life options stemming from the lessons we have learned from Covid-19.

The notion of the “hermeneutical spiral” may be used as an existential metaphor to describe changes from normal situations towards “new normals”, via moments of “distanciation”, which entails critical gaze and reflection.⁴ One begins with a normal way of understanding a given or perceived reality—a text, a theory, a social situation, and a lived experience. When this reality is challenged by a counter-intuitive experience, a rival theory, a newer critical explanation or a crisis situation, then one is challenged to suspend belief in what was erstwhile considered to be “normal”, and seek for newer modes of explanation, to either solve a practical problem, or embrace a newer way of understanding and living.

⁴ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 351. See also Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” trans. David Pellauer, in *Philosophy Today*, 17/2 (1973), 129 ff.

If what results is furtherance of knowledge, or wisdom stemming from this disruption—if some amount of closure takes place—one has come “full circle”, or in fact moved in the direction of an upward spiral in terms of refined interpretations. The hermeneutical theorist Paul Ricoeur describes the hermeneutical circle, or spiral as moving from a “first naivete” to a “second naivete”, via the route of critical distancing.⁵ However, the circle, or spiral could as well be respectively retrograde or downward, resulting in less sanguine interpretations or instances of closure. In some cases, the circle is not completed, leading to an abandonment or suspension of belief in what was considered to be normal, or the first naivete. What results is a loss of faith, resulting from both the distancing provided by the rupture of experience or thinking, as well as the inability, unwillingness or lack of interest to close the circle in terms of newer and richer interpretations.

2.1 Normalcy

Covid-19 has provided conditions for distancing on several counts. It has disrupted the sense of normalcy which humans were used to across the globe. Different persons and communities experienced different types and degrees of this disruption. The term “normal”, however, is misleading, as it is largely context-sensitive. This not only pertains to softer aspects of social life such as culture, religion and personal identity, but also to more universally regulated aspects of life such as public policy and practice. There are no “normal communities,” just as there are no “normal countries” or “normal cultural or religious beliefs and practices.” What is in fact normal is the variety of differences that colour lifestyles and public policy and practical options across the world.

Having said this, the Covid-19 pandemic threw a challenge to each and every global community in terms of revisiting its core values and practices, in terms of what could be considered and adopted as “normal” ways of living. Whatever be the “normal” situation of diverse persons and communities, the pandemic challenged one and all to revise their understanding of normalcy in terms of attitudes, expectations, social and ethical norms, and public policy and practice.

5 In *The Symbolism of Evil*, 350-351; Ricoeur argues that “the dissolution of the myth as explanation is the necessary way to the restoration of the myth as symbol . . . we seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative . . . Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive naivete? Not at all . . . we can, [however], aim at a second naivete in and through criticism.”

It does not take much observation to recognize that, what we have come to accept as normal is a wounded world of social relations featuring diverse forms of inequality, to say nothing of discrimination against, and marginalization of vulnerable communities. It is hoped that Covid-19 has provided the human community with an opportunity to reimagine and redefine human relations and environmental concerns, so that we may systematically and strategically move from diverse forms of alienation towards healthier modes and experiences of belonging.

2.2 Distanciation

The Covid-19 experience gave rise to several forms of distanciation. At the personal level, cherished democratic and liberal values such as liberty, equality and fraternity were temporarily suspended. Freedom of movement, of physical association, of normal free trade—all of these and many more personal freedoms were necessarily compromised. Common and daily material resources were hard to come by, for some time at least. The more well to do were hard put to find ways to spend their money—while the rest had to suffer some form of deficit in some way or the other. At the interpersonal level, the mandate of “social distancing” which really meant, “physical distancing” was a culture shock to one and all—though of course some form of physical distancing is normally followed across cultures in some form or the other. People across the globe suffered both, from a lack of intimacy with friends and a surplus of forced intimate dwelling, especially in domestic spaces.

While “material distanciation”—alienation from resources that are accessible to those more privileged—is a lived reality for most of the world’s poor most of the time, the pandemic made class differentiation more graphic and evident. Maintaining high levels of sanitation at a personal and social level was a nightmare to those less privileged, as basic resources like water, effective sanitizers and face masks were not easily accessible. Maintaining physical distance was a pipe dream to those (mainly migrants and unorganized laborers), who lived in cramped quarters, especially in the poorer urban spaces across the world. Gaining access to adequate health care was another nightmare for the poor—though the rich also shared a bit in this experience during the Delta wave of the disease, especially in India.

The trust that people placed in scientific experts—health professionals, the pharmaceutical industry—took a severe beating. What became evident were the limitations of the human sciences in predicting and controlling the power, intensity and extent of disease. A minuscule virus literally brought the world

to a standstill.⁶ Geopolitical limits of sovereignty were grossly undermined by the virus, which slipped effortlessly through human-made borders and boundaries. International transport and trade were seriously compromised. Sheer optimism and confidence in future economic performance enabled the stock markets of the world not to crumble under the crippling force of the pandemic.

These and other forms of distancing have enabled the entire human family to reflect over the trajectory of our personal and social lives since Covid-19. We have been provided with a golden opportunity to revalue, redesign and reset our world. What could be some of the contours of the “new normals” in various aspects of personal and social life?

2.3 “New Normals” of Belonging

Distancing could work in two ways: the creation of positive and productive circles of interpretation or the opposite. The best and the worst of human qualities—at personal, collective, political and economic levels—came to the fore in the living out of the pandemic on a day-to-day basis. The Covid-19 temporal pause has laid bare two obvious divisive phenomena on the social and international fronts: the unwillingness to share medical technology and material assistance across national and corporate boundaries, and the rising of right-wing and nationalist thinking and practice and the allied closing of regional minds and borders in the wake of globalization. Instead of thinking collectively to confront problems together, humans in leadership roles—often supported by their constituencies—seem to think that fragmentation is the better option.⁷ We are collectively slow learners—apparently preferring to wallow in dystopia, rather than seek more salubrious solutions.

6 See Michel Claessens, *The Science and Politics of COVID-19: How Scientists Should Tackle Global Crises* (Cham: Springer, 2021). In the Introduction, Claessens points out many failures manifested on the part of the scientific community in particular and global leadership in general, in dealing with the crisis: “This story is about a collective failure” (viii); “The fact is that our institutions have failed tremendously” (viii); “Meeting the challenge seemed to be child’s play, given the level of our technoscientific knowledge and the power of the pharmaceutical industry. We were wrong: a new virus can turn off the entire world economy” (ix); “for better or worse, science today is a political business. COVID-19 had highlighted the *politicisation* of science, but we should acknowledge that science is also *politicised*” (x-xi); “Let’s be honest: we all contributed, more or less, to spreading wrong information and nonsense about epidemics, exponentials, vaccines or lockdowns . . . Politics and the pharmaceutical industry are the big winners in this crisis” (xii).

7 See Luke Cooper, *Authoritarian Contagion: The Global Threat to Democracy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

However, going against this grain, and keeping the best interests, and a more sanguine estimation of what it means to be human in mind, we would like to propose more productive projections of a creative hermeneutical spiral stemming from the distancing that Covid-19 provided.⁸ In what way can we as human beings and as a human community move forward in a more noble and sustainable manner, keeping our very survival and that of the future in mind? What lessons have we learned from Covid-19 that may change, if not revolutionize our ways of thinking, relating and acting?⁹ In brief, how may we move from various experiences of “alienation” towards increasingly more noble, inclusive and affectively nourishing experiences of “belonging”?¹⁰

One of the most fundamental lessons from the pandemic is that human life is fragile and human abilities at controlling vital functions are limited. We cannot guarantee personal existence, no matter how powerful we may be. Life is a gift, and humans are not at will to determine the exact contours of this gift. From a religious or spiritual perspective, life may be considered as a phenomenon of grace—an invitation to enjoy existence in human form, even though for a limited time and under limiting circumstances. We have an invitation to enjoy “life in all its fullness”, in the words of Jesus Christ (Gospel of St. John 10:10). A “new normal” would be to recognize human and personal finitude, and to cultivate the dispositions of gratitude and humility in the face of the sheer gratuitousness of life.

Covid-19 has taught us the value of belonging to a community, and how much we are dependent upon the presence and services of those familiar with us as well as absolute strangers. In the widest sense, we form one human community, dependent upon the mutual exchange of goods, services, communication and goodwill across the national yet often artificial boundaries we have created

8 See Tanya Plibersek, ed., *Upturn: A Better Normal After COVID-19* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2020). While the articles in the book are largely related to projections of “new normals” in Australia, the concerns and issues presented have many global parallels.

9 See Forrest Rivers, *COVID-19 and Humanity's Spiritual Awakening* (Conscious Living Media: Tucson, AZ: 2021). Forrest hopefully asserts that, “Many Hindus have long believed that the entire Cosmos moves in a perpetual cycle between dark ages (those defined by ego, discord, and contention) and ages of enlightenment in which awareness of our divine nature prevail. We may be in the opening stages of a planetary shift in consciousness, from such a dark age to one of enlightenment (14).”

10 See my “Transvaluing “Normal” Values,” in *Sambhashan* 01/03 (2020), 52-67, in which I similarly argue that, “We have been provided with a rare global sabbatical, in order to re-examine and reconstruct our core values within different aspects or spheres of human life and engagement” (54).

over time.¹¹ Closer home, the pandemic created conditions upon we were compelled to spend a lot of time with those more intimately related. In a swift moving world further driven by compulsive social media consumption, simple offline human relations have taken a backseat. Family connectedness, which was valued in the past, is now compromised by timetables dictated by material and excessively liberal compulsions. In the past, it was the domestic space that cultivated primary values necessary for healthy social and civic life. This important primal learning space has gradually shrunk, and seems to have lost its erstwhile value and influence. Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to revisit the importance of family connectedness. While the intensity of this situation has sometimes prompted several forms of domestic abuse, it has at the same time proved to be a reminder of both obligations and needs towards cultivating healthy family relationships.¹² A “new normal” would value quality time spent together with family and friends, as an important basis for healthy emotional life, and the cultivation of wholesome personal and civic values which are best learned early enough in life by example from significant others in the private or domestic sphere.

Perhaps, the best lesson we may have learned from the pandemic is that our wants far outreach our needs. Human beings need very little in terms of material consumption to meet goals of physical wellness or existential wellbeing. In an interesting article titled, “Living Through the Pandemic: An Experiment in Egalitarian Living for the Middle Classes?,” AncaGheaus contends that the imposed experiment of the “lockdowns may contain a valuable lesson: it can help the more privileged amongst us to imagine everyday life in an egalitarian society.”¹³ A corollary to embracing a minimalist lifestyle is the invitation to

11 See Matteo Bonotti and Steven Zech, *Recovering Civility During COVID-19* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). The authors make a plea for the cultivation of civility—in general, but especially during the pandemic—which they define in two main ways: “On the one hand, civility is often associated with norms of etiquette and politeness: to be civil, in this first sense, implies to speak and act in ways that comply with these norms. On the other hand, it is linked with the idea of public-mindedness: to be civil, in this second sense, means to display a commitment to the public good, not just to one’s personal or sectarian interest, and to treating others as free and equal” (38).

12 A UNICEF report (6th July 2020) argues for the value of intergenerational living facilitated by COVID-19. See <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/stories/things-we-learned-appreciate-more-during-COVID-19-lockdown> (accessed 20th December, 2021).

13 AncaGheaus, “Living Through the Pandemic: An Experiment in Egalitarian Living for the Middle Classes?,” in *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*, ed. Fay Niker and Aveek Bhattacharya (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 233.

slow down and opt out of a “rat race” or a “dog eat dog world”—epithets more true of humans than of animals. A “new normal” in this domain would be to opt for simpler modes of living at the personal and collective levels, thereby putting less stress on the earth and its resources. There is enough to meet our personal needs across the globe, but not enough to satisfy our personal and collective greed, as Gandhi sagely pointed out many decades earlier.¹⁴

The world is intrinsically connected, so fortune—even if legitimately generated—is ultimately built upon the backs of anonymous persons and advantages bestowed by unequal systems. It is sad that a disaster like the pandemic seems necessary to elicit gratitude from persons who are accustomed to living lives of privilege and entitlement—gratitude for the seemingly insignificant but necessary tasks which make ordinary social life efficient and comfortable. Unfortunately, these tasks are often undertaken by those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder—tasks for which they most often do not receive adequate compensation. For those who continue to wish to live their lives consuming far in excess of human needs—those more materially privileged—the pandemic is an invitation to at least acknowledge, if not appreciate, the benefits allowed to them by society based on their power and material assets.¹⁵ A “new normal” attitude would be to appreciate the interconnectedness of the human family. A corollary would be to adequately compensate those who engage in messy and risky manual labour, as well as those who do routine work on various types of farms, which put food on the tables of the world—tasks not sufficiently appreciated in post-agricultural and post-industrial societies.

The urban and administrative world of labour, facilitating the flow of finance, goods, services and information, moved overnight from an office-based to a home-based model of operations. This was true not only for the corporate world, but even for the world of education, which, at least for the more privileged, moved easily from an offline to an online mode. The potential for working—and studying—from home could prove to be a tremendous environmental and financial benefit, as it will cut down travel needs as

14 See Daniel Cheung and Jacob Bauer, “Greed, Self-Interest and Business Ethics—A Comparative Discussion of Gandhi and Novak,” in *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*, 4/2 (2021), for an interesting contrast between the religious philosophies of Gandhi and Michael Novak concerning greed and self-interest.

15 See J. Michael Ryan and Serena Nanda, *COVID-19: Social Inequalities and Human Possibilities* (New York: Routledge, 2022). The authors make a plea that, “a global humanity comes together as a larger community and begins to measure its successes by the wellbeing of the worst off among us” (170).

well as unnecessary infrastructural development of corporate office spaces and superfluous educational spaces. A “new normal” would be to redefine how work and study be accomplished without wasting the use of resources such as time and space, and unnecessarily increasing carbon footprints. The world of education could move from an intra-mural to a much more extra-mural model. Various forms of hybrid teaching-learning and national and international collaborative ventures could take off, based on the learnings from the time of the pandemic.¹⁶

The necessity of “working from home”, however, presupposed that one had the tools of production to do the needful. In an urban setting, this mostly meant having reliable computers and WIFI networks. For bigger families that lacked such resources, it was exceedingly difficult to have access to both the world of work for the employed and the world of education for students in the family. Even though online education has its advantages—especially for higher education—the pandemic has wrought havoc to the educational programs of those who were not that privileged. We have yet to come to terms with the collateral damage to national and global wellbeing, because of this gap in offline education. The “new normals” in the field of work and study would feature more equitable access to both technological and educational resources. The increasing number of “open source” learning resources is a harbinger of moving along in the direction of this new normal.

Yet, another lesson from the pandemic is the recognition and appreciation for the many freedoms that we often take for granted, the primary freedom being that of freedom of movement and of free association. Sumithra Prasanna argues that, “more than ever, we are today confronted with a threat to our liberties as numerous countries are suspending fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of movement and protections against warrantless searches and warrantless arrests.”¹⁷ Covid-19 has brought

16 See Roy Chan, Krishna Bista and Ryan Allen, eds., *Epilogue of Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education During COVID-19: International Perspectives and Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 2022), where the authors concur that, “COVID-19 restrictions have accelerated the professionalization, normalization, and legitimization of online teaching, learning, and assessment around the world . . . the worldwide pandemic forced several institutions of higher education to conduct their courses fully remotely, thus prompting a digital transformation in institutional culture for a more robust online learning ecosystem” (242). See also Nivedita Kundu and Aloysius Ngalim, eds., *COVID-19: Impact on Education and Beyond* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2021), for an assessment of the impact of the pandemic on pedagogical methodologies in different parts of the globe.

17 SumithraPrasanna, “Are We Losing our Freedoms in a COVID-Stricken World?,” <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/07/10/2020/are-we-losing-our-freedoms-COVID-stricken-world> (Accessed on 6th November 2021).

to public attention the manner in which Governments across the world impose restrictions in the name of public safety and state security. While this is warranted in some cases, increasingly the world over, personal liberties and rights have been seriously jeopardised because of Governmental overreach in curbing personal, institutional and organizational freedoms. A “new normal” in this area would be a prudent use of governmental constraints to curb personal freedoms. The growth of institutions and nations are best made under conditions of responsible freedom. A “new normal” of mutual accountability needs to take root in societies the world over—accountability of individuals and institutions to the larger society and the nation, and accountability of those with administrative and governmental authority to individuals and communities whom they are expected to serve.

Our collective systems of knowledge, organization and social and national relations—however sophisticated they may seem—were severely challenged. The pandemic has revealed more starkly the fragility of human hubris in several key areas of human development. The limitations of science and technology were felt very acutely during this time. The certitude associated with scientific expertise, progress and control over nature, gained since the Enlightenment, was held suspect. Increasingly, many aspects of scientific investigation and technological innovation are seen to be both problematic and culpable in terms of wholesome sustainable development. Global warming and climate change are directly linked to our technological aggression and rampant abuse of unrennewable resources over the past century.¹⁸ Will these new realizations lead to a greater embrace of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN across the globe and across various circles of human endeavor? Will there be sufficient political will to adopt and implement local and global policies related to environmental wellbeing?¹⁹ A “new normal” in this area of scientific prowess is the critical embrace of scientific and technological development, with a view towards the achievement of sustainable and integral human development goals.

A corollary to the “new normal” of sustainable and integral development is the need for greater collaboration across national borders, and thus a need

18 See Daniel Smith, “Nature’s Revenge?: On the Coronavirus and ‘Natural Evil’,” in *Vitality of Evil: Philosophy in the Time of a Pandemic*, ed. Divya Dwivedi (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 139–146.

19 See *Sustainable Lifestyles After COVID-19*, ed. Fabian Echegaray, Valerie Brachya, Philip Vergragt and Lei Zhang (New York: Routledge, 2021). The authors seem confident that, “some of the changes induced by the pandemic are likely to continue, at least in part . . . The sudden acceleration of digital systems, the focus on essential rather than superfluous goods, the enjoyment of non-commercialized forms of leisure in outdoor parks, and different forms of status signaling may be here to stay” (4).

for stellar international leadership.²⁰ The pandemic ushered in a sense of urgency for the international community to work together to come up with a global response in order to contain the spread of the disease. One learning, or “new normal” from this collective experience would be to institutionalize collaboration at various levels so that there is greater equity in terms of the sharing of various resources.²¹ While a strategic practice which politicians frequently employ to consolidate their power is “dividing and ruling”—within and outside the state—this should no longer be acceptable, either in terms of normal discourse or even in a situation of real or created crisis. The “new normal” would move towards embracing a spirit, if not a structure of federal cosmopolitanism, rather than a narrow sentiment and practice of insular nationalism.

On the religious front, while public religious prayer and worship was severely curtailed, believers of all faiths were made more aware of the wide variety of religious and spiritual resources available online. This may be a threat to those in administrative roles in organized religion, but it has proved to be an immense blessing in terms of accessibility of religious resources for the wider population. The lay faithful were, perhaps for the first time, aware of the variety of diverse transnational opportunities for spiritual growth—tapping resources from across the world, rather than having to depend on local and often limited institutional and personal resources. While normal, offline worship has its more obvious advantages, for those who cannot avail of such resources—the elderly, migrants who want to be in touch with their own communities far away, those living in remote areas—the pandemic has thrown open a floodgate of spiritual, inspirational and motivational resources. Of course, one has to employ prudence in choosing which websites and other digital resources to plumb for moral and spiritual inspiration. The new normal in the area of religion and spirituality would be for religious organizations to create meaningful online resources in order to serve those who may be unwilling or find it difficult to practice their faith offline. The internet is an excellent means to cater to those on spiritual and religious peripheries—

20 See Satinder Dhiman and Joan Marques, eds., *Leadership After COVID-19: Working Together Toward a Sustainable Future* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022). The editors contend that, “we must build on the lessons we have learned so far and help leaders to embrace universal, holistic leadership principles—self-evident, self-validating laws that govern how leaders should lead change: be authentic, have integrity, serve selflessly, and create communities of care, together” (ix).

21 See Colleen Flood *et al.*, “Overview of COVID-19: Old and New Vulnerabilities,” in *Vulnerable: The Law, Policy and Ethics of COVID-19*, ed., Colleen Flood *et al.* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020), 1-27, where the authors make a plea for the redressal of inequities which vulnerable persons and communities face both in COVID and non-COVID times.

especially the youth, who may need a new spiritual discourse and imagination to satisfy their spiritual yearnings and address their critical queries and specific concerns.

Conclusion

Human beings are creatures of habit. The global drama of Covid-19 may soon lose its power to radically transform our ways of living.²² Only time will tell, if the embrace of these proposed “new normals” will take off. Even though some may seem more compelling and even necessary for wholesome social living we may well lapse into old ways soon enough. On the other hand, some aspects of the “new normals” will gain ascendancy and become accepted as new ways of life, based on increasing social acceptance, preference and compulsion. Just as we move from one paradigm to another, it is hopeful that our collective experience of combating the scourge of Covid-19 will usher in several “new normals” in various dimensions of social life. The survival of human life and of our planetary ecosystem may well depend on these choices.

22 In the words of Paolo Giordano, in *How Contagion Works*, trans. Alex Valene (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 6. “Once the emergency is over, any temporary awareness will also disappear – that is the nature of illnesses.”

Ethics of Care: Seeking a Christian Response to the Pandemic

S. Sekar Sebastian

Abstract:

The Ethics of Care: A Christian response to the pandemic is a need of the time as we are encountering a health crisis that is pandemic. Covid-19 as a pandemic reality does not see the place, people, time, caste, creed, profession, economic status and so on. Every pandemic crisis demands its unique understanding and various responses. It is a crisis that challenges our response in the way of our commitment to the care. As Christian philosophers in India, this article starts off by explaining the reality of the pandemic that may be a challenge and an opportunity to the morality and faith. Thus, we pay special attention to the ethics of care and our response to coronavirus pandemic. Further it explores the possibility of a new world order that seeks a more equal, compassionate and humane global order. It discovers and examines moral questions that arise out of a world that is broken and suffering, beset by devastation and yet called to live the faith responsibly and truthfully. Thus, the article puts forward some of the dilemmas wherein traditional faith and practices are confronted by the pandemic especially in areas like worship, the sacraments and understanding the value of technology in the practice of the faith with the importance of ethics of care.

Keywords: *Care, ethics, pandemic, compassion, responsibility.*

Introduction

Everyone is interested in ethics. We all have our own ideas about what is right and what is wrong and how we can spell the difference. Our young generation today faces a greater array of moral problems than fifty years ago. It is not surprising, as so many people believe that there is no moral standard left. Morality is dead, we are told by many, or else it is simply the views of the old folk revealing in their nostalgia. But we cannot simply ignore the

importance of ethics. It cannot stand alienated from the realities of the people. Hence, ethics is, today, understood as the field entailing all the problems and crises faced by our people. One of the crises affecting the entire humanity in recent times is Covid-19. This crisis demands ethics of care in the midst of indifference and ignorance blooming.

The word 'covid' was unknown and uncommon till December 2019. We import a lot of materials and ideologies from different parts of the world. But the only material that is imported from outside without our consent is Covid-19. Its budding emerged in one part and started spreading everywhere in the world. Thus, it has become pandemic disease. This pandemic reality does not see the place, people, time, caste, creed, profession, economic status and so on. The global crisis caused by the Covid-19 has become pandemic without difference to many others that have beset humankind. Every pandemic crisis demands its unique understanding and various responses. Whoever is prone to this virus spread, he/she is infected and affected. The problem also challenges our response in the way of our commitment to the care. From the perspective of Christian philosophers in India, this paper starts off by explaining the reality of the pandemic that may be a challenge and an opportunity to the morality and faith. Thus, we pay special attention to the ethics of care and our response to coronavirus pandemic.

This article also explores the possibility of a new world order that seeks a more equal, compassionate and humane global order. It discovers and examines moral questions that arise out of a world that is broken and suffering, beset by devastation and yet called to live the faith responsibly and truthfully. It puts forward some of the dilemmas wherein traditional faith and practices are confronted by the pandemic especially in areas like worship, the sacraments and understanding the value of technology in the practice of the faith with the importance of ethics of care.

1 Crisis Inroads into Challenge

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real challenge. When a crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.¹ This pandemic causes a crisis affecting the entire rhythm of the day-to-day life. The first crisis caused by the Covid started with the impose of a nation-wide lockdown on freedom of movement of all citizens except those undertaking essential services. Also, a curfew curtails movement during the night hours,

1 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiv.

limiting free movement only to those who seek medical assistance or to purchase essential food, closure of entrance points to the country and airline travel, international and domestic flights is executed. Educational institutions were also closed, transportation was limited, workers could not go to work, places of entertainment, worship, sport, were closed down, travel was severely restricted, and borders were closed. There was also a total ban on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. These were, in any estimation, drastic measures imposed on the civilian population, especially during peacetime. People were not only forced to stay at home under pain of penalties, but suddenly they found themselves under siege, with visible police and army activity, harassed, forced to explain movements, to produce permit cards with the compromise of their freedom. The intention of all these extraordinary measures is to restrict the spread of the infections. At the same time measures were taken to enhance communication systems, educating people about this unprecedented public health hazard, and promote people's participation in the control and management of the disease.²

Even though it is measured as a crisis affecting the people, it becomes necessary challenge as it entails enjoining public cooperation and voluntary compliance, enforcement of the measures wherever necessary, advisories on appropriate and safe social conduct, namely, social distancing, frequent adherence to hygiene measures like washing of hands, and the avoidance of shaking hand while greeting. Sneezing and coughing onto the inside of a bent, inside of the elbow, wearing a mask, regular changes of clothes, avoiding densely populated areas and crowded places, using hand sanitizer, and spraying and disinfecting surfaces continue to be communicated. And also, it is important to point out that churches and all places of worship are not exempt from these provisions. Buildings and places of worship remain closed, no public acts of worship are permitted, and ministers are not exempt from limitations of movement such that parishioners in these strange circumstances are virtually without pastoral assistance in cases of need. Weddings and funerals are also similarly restricted.³

It is our view that the church and religious societies will always remain essential features of a modern community living amidst the coronavirus crisis and beyond. However, in order to deal with the crisis, religious communities must also seek no special favours, instead they are obliged to place themselves in the hands of public services that address the national health crisis. They

2 N. Barney Pityana, GCOB, *A Theological Statement on the Coronavirus Pandemic Living the Faith Responsibly* (Religion & Theology 27), (2020), 335.

3 *Ibid.*

should rather seek to serve as the magnetic force of the social cohesion and to place themselves at the disposal of the community to serve the best interests of God in service to God's people. To that end the local parish community has a role to play that is not incomparable to that which health and security practitioners might play.⁴

It becomes true that the Covid-19 pandemic is a public health crisis of unimaginable proportions. It requires the Governments and civil society to have an adequate response to assist the public to maintain as much health as is possible. To do so, public health officials enjoy the advice and assistance of scientists, and an army of health practitioners were called into service to provide emergency health care. Hospitals, clinics, and other health care facilities had to be made available to respond to this crisis. This produces a double jeopardy: the ordinary health management activities of hospitals surely do not go away. Cancer patients need care, surgery is required to fix a myriad of ailments, maternity and neo-natal facilities are needed as normal. The second factor is that the nature of Covid-19 is that co-morbidities render those who suffer from ailments like high blood pressure, diabetes, heart and lung problems, HIV and Aids, and obesity most likely to be susceptible to infection and most likely to die. How those vulnerable people continue to receive appropriate health care even though the focus of health care provision has been diverted towards addressing the Covid-19 crisis, becomes an acute health management challenge.⁵

Covid-19 is more than a public health crisis. It is as much a matter of health as it is also a socio-economic disaster. As a public health crisis, it has focused the attention of the States on the one threat to public health, but while doing so it may have diverted attention from other public health crises in the country including HIV/Aids, neo-natal, maternal and child health facilities, non-communicable diseases, and various measures for preventive health necessary.

In such circumstances and conditions, challenge makes it difficult to maintain the observance of the regulations to the stricture required to push back infections. In most of the densely populated areas, social distancing, washing of hands, sanitizers, and the wearing of masks, are all but a distant dream, made worse by the chronic unavailability of water and sanitation, and for many without an income, food insecurity, and homelessness. Isolation and quarantine are just impossible to achieve within the social challenges that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 337.

a large number of people in densely populated communities face as a daily struggle of life. Even measures initiated to take the homeless of the streets and provide food for them are quickly defied by those meant to help. Government, correctly, sought to make provision to meet such socio-economic needs as are exposed by the lockdown regulations. What is least talked about, though, is the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on the psychological health of people being confined to their homes, especially in places where the 'homes' are rather rudimentary informal structures. The effect of gender violence, abuse of women and children, depression and mental health, and family violence are widely reported. It is also to be noted that crime at all levels is noticeably at a minimum during the first phase of lockdown, especially given that alcohol is not available, but as soon as alcohol sales are allowed, there is then a spike in these violent levels of crime, as well as a steep rise in road fatalities and violence against women to such an extent that there are calls for a ban or further restriction on the sale of alcohol.⁶

2 Challenges Entail Response

Certain questions emerge as what then we have learnt about the novel pandemic crisis? Firstly, that the pandemic is here to stay, and it is no longer just a remote or a passing phenomenon. It exhorts us that we will have to learn to live with the disease just as we live precariously with so many other diseases. Secondly, we have learnt that this is an enigma. Nobody really knows much about it. Dealing with it is a voyage of discovery. Not only there is no proper vaccine or cure at this stage, but also not much is known about its provenance, causes, as well as its physiological or pharmacological substance, although by now, we know that it comes about by infection through human contact. It is also known that its genesis is human contact with its traditional carriers, bats or pangolins. Because it is so widespread, opportunistic, and fast it can happen to anybody and it happens at random to everybody.⁷

For all those reasons, it is rightly said that the new coronavirus constitutes a 'new *normale*' for society. We shall live by the new rules, learn and practice new rules of social intercourse, conduct human affairs differently than we had been used to, manage health risks and learn new expertise in medical and scientific research. In other words, the social determinants of health should now become an intrinsic part of social and financial planning. In some measures that is because their social circumstances mean that they are less

⁶ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.

protected from opportunistic diseases and suffer in general from underlying, pre-existent co-morbidities. It means that infection is most likely to end in death.⁸ Thirdly, as a Christian, it implies that one has made informed choices for life (Deut. 30:19). It is often stated that society, today, is confronted with a choice between safe living and livelihoods. The implication is that government has to prioritise health care systems, reduce infections, provide medical and nursing care for the sick, and do whatever is possible to save lives. The suggestion is that to do so may entail, of necessity, accepting that the economic well-being of citizens and the economic health of society may well get compromised in the process. That is a non-choice. The truth is that human well-being requires both good health and a quality of life. It can never be either/or. In other words what is required is nothing less than fullness of life.

In a recent article reflecting on the impact of the novel coronavirus on society and imagining the world post-coronavirus, Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari expresses a concern that, presented with the choice as stated above, one is called to abandon one's humanity and rights, and surrender one's intellect and moral responsibility to those in authority who must be trusted to have one's best interests at all times. That's a tough call. He argues, "... to achieve such a level of compliance and co-operation, you need trust. People need to trust science, to trust public authorities, and to trust the media. Over the past few years, irresponsible politicians have deliberately undermined trust in science, in public authorities and in the media. Now these same irresponsible politicians might be tempted to take the high road to authoritarianism, arguing that you just cannot trust the public to do the right thing."⁹

3 Response with Proper Responsibility

Although individuals have primary responsibility to care for their own physiological health as well as for the psychological, ethical, and spiritual aspects of their personal development, such developments can be achieved only with the help of other members of the community. People belong to many different communities like their family, various social organizations, business organizations, and various civic entities. Many of these communities have a direct or indirect relationship to a person's health or health care. In advanced communities, such help is furnished by persons who have committed themselves to this vocation and been educated for the special social roles called

⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁹ Yuval Noah Harari, "Yuval Noah Harari: The World after Coronavirus," *Financial Times*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca>, 75.

the health care professions and also by society, that is, by government funding. The health care profession is one among several professions basic to the culture of any advanced community. We consider the nature of professions in general with the specific characteristics of the health care profession. Because the health care profession is founded upon trust focusing upon the activities in the physician-patient relationship that foster trust, counselling, and communication and confidentiality. When considering the responsibilities of the civic society, an analysis of the task of local communities is beyond the scope of our concern.¹⁰

The crises created by Covid-19 could be alleviated and transformed with proper response leading to responsibility. New ideas are to be presented in the search for lasting solutions. The crises of our times require new solutions and these solutions are most likely to come from altruistic trend setters like politicians, committed public workers, economists and social scientists. The crises have produced new thinking and new ideas. It is those ideas that are to place society on a new pathway towards a shared prosperity. In a penetratingly candid essay, “The Neo-Liberal Era Is Ending – What Comes Next?,” Rutger Bregman takes a very positive and optimistic outlook as he writes:

The ideology that was dominant these last 40 years is dying. What will replace it? Nobody knows for sure. ... This pandemic could send us down path of new values. If there was one dogma that defined neoliberalism, it's that most people are selfish. And it's from that cynical view of human nature that all the rest followed – the privatisation, the growing inequality, and the erosion of the public sphere. Now a space has opened up for a different, more realistic view of human nature: that humankind has evolved to cooperate. It's from that conviction that all the rest can follow – a government based on trust, a tax system rooted in solidarity, and the sustainable investments needed to secure our future.¹¹

4 Christian Response to the Pandemic

The challenge we face today is straightforward; and what does it mean to be a person of faith today, not so much about whether belief in God is rendered

10 Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. Jean K. deBlois, C.S.J. Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P. (Eds.), *Health Care Ethics* (Washington D. C.: University Press Washington, 2006), 210.

11 Rutger Bregman, “The Neo-Liberal Era Is Ending – What Comes Next?,” *The Correspondent*, 14 May 2020, <https://thecorrespondent.com/466/the-neoliberal-era-is-ending-what-comes-next/61655148676-a00ee8ga>.

meaningless by the suffering caused by the pandemic rather, how does one become fully human in the face of the suffering and beyond? So much is bound to change. Therefore, can we identify our faith practice any longer with what we have come to know to be what our faith teaches?

Answer to these questions demands Christian response to the pandemic crisis with the spiritual dimension of pastoral care. It is something that most of us would acknowledge during the health crisis due to Covid-19. Spirituality refers only to that part of the caring relationship that lies beyond rational explanation and scientific method. Within all caring encounters there is a transcendent dynamic that encompasses, yet lifts us beyond our professional skills and competencies into the realms of mystery. To speak of the spiritual dimensions of pastoral care is thus, at very least, to admit that the caring relationship is always more than the sum of its parts. Beyond this, however, there are many who would argue that this 'something other' has to do with the introduction of 'God' into our understanding of ourselves, and the world we live in.

Christian response to the pandemic encourages health care professionals to be imbibed by their faith to understand this vocation in a special way just as professionals of other religions, or philosophies of life are called by theirs. Christians think of life as a gift from God and the body as a marvellous work of divine creation to be revered as a temple of God (1 Cor 6:19, 2 Cor 6:16). They also think of the human person not only as a living body but also as a body living with spiritual life open to a share in the eternal life of God. Even when sickness cannot be overcome, the struggle against it can be lived through as an experience that can further moral and spiritual growth. Thus, the Christian physician, or nurse is truly a minister of God, cooperating with Him in helping human beings overcoming their suffering to live more fully.¹²

The Christian response to the pandemic makes a demand to find a model in Jesus Christ, the healer. Although Christians and Christian medical professional do not have supernatural or miraculous powers, they do have medical skill and social responsibility as a gift from God. We can imitate Jesus's compassion for the patient and his reaching out to the most neglected, even the lepers. This Christian attitude cannot be a matter of mere pious words; rather, it is a profound dependence on God, who gives us the inspiration, insight, and courage to carry out our work as professionally and as skilfully as possible.

12 Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. Jean K. deBlois, C.S.J. Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P. (Eds.), *Health Care Ethics*, 209.

Moreover, one should not make the mistake of thinking that the ethical aspect of medicine pertains only to its personal, priestly side. It also penetrates the scientific aspect. A scientific approach with Christian response to disease is built on devotion to objective truth and the courageous persevering effort to advance this truth through participation, research and criticism.¹³

5 A New Paradigm for Ethics of Care

Ethics of health care is not only the ontological property of the intellectuals and medical professionals. Also, people who are more or less bystanders realize that the profession of health care is changing. Theorists interpret these changes in terms of paradigms; that is, they maintain that the fundamental model, blueprint, or archetype for the profession of health care is changing. For years the paradigm revolved around highly trained physicians and also well-equipped acute care facilities. The paradigm could have been phrased in this manner: 'Good health depends on highly trained physicians and acute care hospitals with state-of-the-art technology.' Guided by this paradigm, specialists outnumbered primary care physicians; physicians' medical decisions usually were not subject to objective accountability; there was no effort to limit the number of physicians; cost was not a factor in evaluating quality of care; and performing high-tech surgical procedures such as transplantation or cardiac angioplasty, which benefit a comparative few, became the standard for excellence when evaluating acute care hospitals. But this paradigm did not respond to the needs of the public. It resulted in a continual spiral of expenses, and it neglected health needs of several segments of the public such as the poor and the elderly.¹⁴

What is the new paradigm for ethics of health care? It seems that two paradigms are vying with each other for acceptance. The first paradigm might be expressed as follows: Health care is a business, and everything should be structured with a view to making the greatest profit. Those who accept this paradigm bargain with health care professionals, whether physicians or acute care hospital administrations, to accept less remuneration for their efforts. In other words, cutting the cost of health care and making a profit for stockholders receives top priority, even though quality care and client satisfaction are also mentioned as secondary objectives.¹⁵

Fortunately, there is another paradigm developing. This new paradigm features

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

a more cost-conscious offering of health care, but its main perspective is to continue not-for-profit health care facilities and care for personal needs in a holistic manner. Hopefully, the renewed emphasis on clients' needs will lead health care to stimulate society toward a greater effort to make access to health care a reality for all. The effects of the second new paradigm in ethics of health care professions will occur in the following features:

1. Client participation: The emphasis shifts from patient compliance to client participation. People increasingly expect to know not only their diagnosis, but also details of patho-physiology, treatment options, and prognosis.
2. Medical decision making: Individuals differ with respect to the amount of detail regarding their health they wish to know and the degree to which they wish to participate in decision making. Consequently, the art of person-centred care involves determining the appropriate amount of information and participation from the individual patient's perspective.
3. Medical law: The mere enactment of state laws recognizing this legal device demonstrates that medical law now bends over backward in order to support person-centred decision making.
4. Medical education: The person-centred paradigm will demand a change in emphasis and content in the medical school curriculum. Curriculum revision in medical schools has been devoted to utilizing new learning methods. Little attention has been given to preparing young people for a new vision of health care.
5. Medical research: Hard biomedical outcomes have long been the currency of medical research. Over recent years, however, there has been increasing realization that other "softer" outcomes such as functional states, quality of life, and client satisfaction may be at least as relevant. The primary difference between traditional outcomes and newer outcomes is that the latter requires person-centred perspectives.¹⁶

If health care as a business becomes the dominant paradigm for the provision of health care, then a noble profession will be destroyed. Moreover, the quality of health care for all people in the country will be diminished. One does not need a host of empirical studies to prove these conclusions. When profit becomes the principal goal of any enterprise, all other partial goals, no matter how noble, are sooner or later sacrificed. Conversely, if the person-centred

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

paradigm becomes predominant, then we can retain the best qualities from the past, develop a health care system that fulfils our personal and social needs, and hopefully extends access to health care to all in need of it.

6 Ethics of Health Care – The Need of the Hour

First and foremost, ethics of health care accelerates our duty to make people infected with the virus accept their health condition and create hope in their mind-set. Also fear about the pandemic is imbued in the nerve of the people. The pandemic has caused even people of faith to doubt and “suddenly the faith that they used to have in the Almighty God is not there anymore. People are fear-stricken.”¹⁷ Clearly in his Christian lexicon faith generates a fearlessness even in the face of danger. In any event, fear is not a condition of being without faith. Fear may well be a recognition of the presence of God. Hence, the prime duty of ethics of care is to dispel fear and create trust and confidence in the persons infected to encounter the reality.

The ethics of health care also promotes a moral order that pours out the life of Christ as victim and sacrifice for justice and peace in the world. Recognising that Covid-19 has exacerbated the brokenness of the world, causes men and women to live together in distance and in relationships of mutual suspicion, the ethics of care must recognise that all is not well – and that malady afflicts the people first just as much as it has devastated the world. In that sense Covid-19 could be an opportunity and an occasion for reconciliation and a restoration of the lost relationships. It is worthwhile to ponder as to the kind of ethics of care that will form itself post Covid-19?¹⁸

The ethics of care is a need of the hour as it encourages human person as a moral substance about taking responsibility and understanding the operations of human agency. The moral person as agents of God, the law giver, humanity is continuously a part of the making and unmaking of creation. If that is so then choices are made in such a way as to fulfil the acts of God. In reality, this human agency can be observed in the work of scientists and researchers seeking, by the skill and expertise of science, to find a vaccine that will bring health to those who might otherwise be dying as a result of the infection. Likewise, this understanding of God and the human also explains why ethics of care is able to denounce evil and injustice, campaign for a fair and a just world, value human life and human dignity, and call for more sustainable

17 N. Barney Pityana, GCOB, *A Theological Statement on the Coronavirus Pandemic Living the Faith Responsibly* (Religion & Theology 27), (2020), 349.

18 *Ibid.*, 355.

organs of human living alongside human nature that are mutually beneficial. It is out of ethics of care with love and peace with justice that is part of ethics of care that a fair and just distribution of wealth is demanded and the search for lasting and viable solutions to the human predicament is compelling.¹⁹

Finally, ethics of care deals with Covid-19 as ultimately never just about the person affected or dying in isolation at a point in time. It is concerned about community and family, about dreams and aspirations of the afflicted. In reality, ethics of care is giving priority to those who lost hopes and tainted or broken futures. It is also about understanding the social and psychological factors that bring about a broken society, or ill-health, or disease in individuals, or communities, the sources and causes of pain and suffering, but ultimately in instilling human nature with hope and victory over life. Ethics of care promotes the life of faith as also a celebration of life, of thanksgiving about what has been achieved, about the joys of human living and strengths to meet the challenges that fullness of life at present. The work of caring, of assurance and hope is an ongoing task for those who understand the dynamism of community that is formed and shaped by a selfless community. Ethics of care indicates that Covid-19 must be put in place, families must continue to live wholesome lives, loved ones must be memorialised and humanised. More importantly, broken families must be cared for, orphans must be cared for and nurtured. Above all, the values, cultures, the stories of life must be told, protected, and sustained for the sake of posterity. Ethics of care creates a society that may have lost a whole generation of the elderly that transmission of common wisdom, culture, language, and values to the younger generation is a big loss that cannot be recovered.²⁰

For being a Christian philosopher caught in the warp and weft of an unfathomable crisis of this magnitude, is to turn to the almighty for answers, but also, that is what being human is about. It is by the power of the almighty that the faithful both understand and seek wisdom to find answer. God becomes present in the situation of health crisis. We do not always know the sources of all things. If we did, then there would be no need to be curious about our physical environment. It helps one to understand that not everything that we experience today is known or knowable. It is in always being open to new knowledge and understandings that we become human. It is in the surprises of life that the knowledge of the almighty gives substance and meaning. Learning and discovery are a continuous activity. While it may point to

19 *Ibid.*, 356.

20 *Ibid.*, 357.

human limitations and require a more mature and reasoned understanding of God, nonetheless it encourages human responsibility.²¹ In the midst of the pandemic situation, Christian philosophers and all must find it possible to be content with their reality of life and death, seek and find meaning for their lives, comfort, grieve and celebrate the fulness of life, ponder on the mystery that abides, and thank God for science, human care, and human solidarity. The search for meaning never reaches finality, nor is it confined to certain episode of human experience. Pandemics are regularly succeeded by a spiritual revival. Without doubt the coronavirus and lockdown are bound to induce a pining and a longing for the almighty out of the isolation under conditions of fear and wonder. There will be a search for the spiritual centre of human life and a desire for reassurance.

Conclusion

Pain, sickness and suffering can be ignored or avoided, but only for a time. Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone holds dual citizenship, in the Kingdom of the well and in the Kingdom of the sick. Although, we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of the other place.²² Those who are unhappy with their physical condition have no need for anything in this world but people become happy when they are capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess warmth of heart, impulsiveness, and pity.

By the Post-coronavirus, we are reminded of the integrity of functions of God. There are no easy answers. Is it also not true that this God we are searching for is the one who gives us the intelligence and the resolve to restructure our social and economic life as to ensure that inequality and injustice never again find others unable to enjoy the means of life so as to survive the onslaught of a Covid-19 virus. Global crises come in cycles and in a variety of scales. In a sense, history repeats itself. But more importantly, what are the lessons that we have learnt so that we could proceed with wisdom into the future. It may be that in this instance humanity will learn to abide by the ethics of care, as Pope Francis teaches, and in the world that we may come to a realisation that ethical power is best when it is shared and the resources of the world enjoyed

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kenneth Boyd, "Pain, sickness and suffering," in David Willows and John Swinton (Eds.), *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2001), 81.

by all. We can state that ethics of care is neither a set of laws or moral rules, nor a theory of such principles. It indicates ethical relation to the human other. It is based on the radical asymmetry of responsibility for the other. Ethics of care does not mean a quest for perfection, or personal accomplishment rather claims the responsibility to the Other from which the ego cannot escape and which is the secret of its uniqueness. Ethics of care is also based on obligation to the Other, not on any empirical or metaphysical 'sameness' between myself and the other that this fundamental obligation is asymmetrical. With this insistence of the responsible self or moral self for the Other, ethics evolves as ethics of care.

Medical Assessment of Covid-19: Philosophical Perspectives

John Peter Vallabadoss, OFM Cap

Abstract:

Rightly called as pandemic, the outbreak of Covid-19 has left humanity of advanced sciences and of improved health care systems, feeling exhausted, uncertain, tired and worn out by the burden of measures in prevention and cure of the disease. Thoroughly wounded in the fight against the virus, human beings are yet hopeful to find a way forward although the human cost of the crisis has been so high. The efforts for perseverance and constant monitoring of the grim situation in medical and health care facilities are on the verge of exhaustion and collapse. The current human tragedy has unfolded many anthropological questions and reflections. The paper attempts to spell out few philosophical perspectives by speaking of the scientific knowledge about the virus and by enumerating the medical interventions of the pandemic crisis.

Keywords: *medical, viruses science, health care, immunization, biological sciences*

Introduction

Human incapacity and powerlessness against an invisible creature, SARS-CoV-2, has been exhibited during the Covid-19 crisis. Advancements in medical sciences and progress in technological innovations in human history have demonstrated their limitedness in an effort to rapidly containing the spread and infection of the 'killer' virus. In history of infectious diseases that humanity has faced and succumbed to, none has been more dangerous to kill millions of people across the globe. Rightly called as pandemic, the outbreak of Covid-19 has left humanity of advanced sciences and of improved health care systems, feeling exhausted, uncertain, tired and worn out by the burden of measures in prevention and cure of the disease. Thoroughly wounded

in the fight against the virus, human beings are yet hopeful to find a way forward although the human cost of the crisis has been so high, for more than a year now. By April 2021, some countries are experiencing the second wave, whereas others the third wave of resurgence of infections, the efforts for perseverance and constant monitoring of the grim situation in medical and health care facilities are on the verge of exhaustion and collapse. The current human tragedy has unfolded many anthropological questions and reflections. The paper attempts to spell out few philosophical perspectives by speaking of the scientific knowledge about the virus and by enumerating the medical interventions of the pandemic crisis.

1 Unfolding of Human Crisis

In the new scenario the world in twenty first century we are at the very critical stage in many parts of the world experiencing the pandemic crisis. The origin of the Covid-19 outbreak has still remained a mystery even though many investigations are taken up, often clouded with geo-political and global economic concerns of powerful countries. From the first reported cases at Wuhan in China, the spread of infections through human to human contacts, has forced health and political authorities to quickly respond with announcing several strict health and sanitary measures among general population. Improving health facilities including intensive care units with artificial life support systems with ventilators, and setting up additional hospitalization amenities, the authorities have left no stone unturned in addressing the crisis. While health workers have sacrificed their time and energy in catering to the need of bleeding humanity, the scientific community have worked overtime in developing both preventive vaccines and possible medications and treatments. What we are fighting against is invisible.¹ Success in bringing out several brands of vaccines, approved, distributed and administered at least to potentially vulnerable population so far, has given certain hope in overcoming the crisis. Yet, few dangers of potential side effects of some of the vaccines, as reported, have slowed down the vaccination roll out, along with other factors of manufacturing and delivery systems. In all these, humans have become guinea pigs for many research and scientific experimentation on the Covid-19.

Current situation of mutation capability of the virus has still added greater worries to human crisis. With detection of new variants, the knowledge about the virus and its previous and recent variants is that the virus is still behaving in same way and spreading with the similar patterns. More the chances we

1 Klaus Schwab & Thierry Malleret, *Covid-19: The Great Reset* (Geneva: Forum Publishing, 2020), 3.

give it to spread and to multiply within humans, more the changes it is going to have to keep changing itself as its natural property. What one could do at the present moment is to focus and to reduce transmission possibilities. The effectiveness in containing the virus is with testing, identifying the infected, tracking and contact tracing and quarantining the contacts, proving supportive isolation and making sure of distancing with each other through complying with standard guidelines, following respiratory etiquettes and staying home. All these measures have shown again and again the desired results. Hope is still in the crisis that intensive health care with public measures will work against these variants in bringing down the transmission.² While epidemics are by nature divisive and traumatizing, and the spread has a unique ability to fuel fear, anxiety and mass hysteria, the humanity has unique challenge with our social cohesion and collective capacity to manage the crisis.

2 Pandemic Symptoms and Diagnosis

From the first months of the year 2020 the world has been experiencing a single nightmare, Corona, with ever increasing cases and deaths. Panic, fear, lockdowns, draconian quarantine measures have collapsed the personal and social life of global population. The subsequent collateral damage is unprecedented. Termed as the new 'killer' virus, Covid-19 has posed true threat with severe illness and symptoms. The number of cases surged and the virus vaulted to the top of the life of existential threats to the world.

As for the current medical assessments are concerned, Covid-19 virus affects several organs of the human body with a wide spectrum of symptoms and signs of illness, such as cough, sore throat, high temperature, diarrhoea, headache, fatigue and loss of sense of smell and taste, with clinical conditions of lung functioning, blood pressure and oxygen level and heart rate. With accurate diagnosis for ensuring the infection of the virus, the medical personnel are prepared for avoiding transmission of the disease and providing appropriate care, as there is no medication and cure by treatment, available for the moment. Careful observations and continued study of Covid-19 cases have shown that critical care of the patients helped recovering from the infection with boosting of personal immune system in the affected body. The primary health care in proper hospital or para-medical settings with facilities for artificial respiratory have shown very positive results across the globe. The promptness in testing,

2 Soumya Swaminathan, "There is Hope," An interview with Melissa Fleming, 12 Mar, 2021. <https://www.un.org/en/awake-at-night/S3-E21-there-is-hope>. Accessed on 1 April, 2021.

diagnosing and isolating the patients with care have presented certain hope in human capacity to overcome this medical crisis globally, with subsequent success in future clinical treatment with proper medicines.³

Quick to intervene the World Health Organization (WHO) has started giving regular updates on conditions, risks, research and development. The guidance to healthcare workers and to the policy makers has been highly appreciated. Many health workers and experts diagnose on top of their head, not with proper analysis. “The genetic sequencing of the virus suggests that SARS-CoV-2 is a betacoronavirus closely linked to the SARS virus.”⁴ The clinical syndromes associated with Covid-19 are severe pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, sepsis with life-threatening organ dysfunction and septic shock with persisting hypotension. Standard precautions include hand hygiene and use of personal protective equipment (PPE), safe waste management, disinfection of equipment.

Coexistence of coronaviruses with humans and animals worldwide has not been disputed and these viruses continuously undergo genetic mutation, the results of which countless variants are generated. The corona virus comprise of a large family of viruses⁵ commonly known earlier for more than a decade. Many of these are responsible for respiratory infections and generate symptoms with marginal clinical significance. With Covid-19, the costly measures for diagnosing infections, searches for antiviral agents and vaccine development have been prioritised or have been subject to serious discussion.⁶ With the current plan of global vaccination programme the ordinary people have raised concerned over its realistic and scientific future in containing the virus. Reliability of the test kits raised concerns over virus detection. The diagnostic RT-PCR (real time - polymerase chain reaction), was first developed by Institute for Virology at the Charité Berlin and was used worldwide.⁷ The reliability, specificity and sensitivity depend on the myriad

3 “There is Hope,” Interview by Melissa Fleming, (12 Mar 2021) <https://www.un.org/en/awake-at-night/S3-E21-there-is-hope>.

4 “Clinical management of severe acute respiratory infection when COVID-19 disease is suspected,” *Interim Guidance* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 13 Mar 2020), 2.

5 The seven different strains of corona virus before COVID-19 are listed as Alphacoronavirus (229E, NL63) Betacoronavirus (OC43, HKU1, MERS-CoV, Sars-CoV). With novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, we have four more variants detected (in UK, SouthAfrica, Brazil and India).

6 Karina Reiss & Sucharit Bhakdi, *Corona False Alarm? – Facts and Figures* (London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2020), 9.

7 Victor M.Corman, et.al., “Detection of 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) by Real-Time RT-PCR,” *Eurosurveillance* 25, no. 3 (January 2020), 45.

of factors, with critical analysis. Suspicions and investigations over the real medical conditions, reports of regular deaths substantially increasing in certain period of the year, and lockdowns, have only increased the unintentional but serious consequences for the public's health.⁸

3 Invisible Reality and the Panic Battle

The inaccurate method of reporting 'coronavirus deaths' also naturally spread fear and panic, rendering the general public willing to accept the irrational and excessive preventive measures.⁹ The scenario of wave of infections is typical in some countries which is often misused to maintain fear in the population. Risk assessment and management of exposure of medical personnel and health care workers in the context of Covid-19 and its variants, have left health care facilities to gather data of virus infection and to provide appropriate management of their infection risk. Substantial improvement in prevention and treatment coverage of infectious diseases in past years, have left the medical and scientific community to oblivion as the current rate of progress of Covid-19 virus have rapidly growing with no rapidly scaling up solutions for high risk. What have been proposed medically and scientifically for infection prevention and control are widely known: wash hands, apron, PPE protocol, hand hygiene patient, hand hygiene-aseptic cleaning, hand hygiene surroundings, decontamination hightouchsurfaces, accident patient biological fluids.¹⁰

Constant vigilance, early detection and monitoring with a unified response both in national and global level have led to immediate intervention. In fight against the uncontrollable virus and to cure from the infection caused by it, the health authorities strengthened to improve timelines of data which has the greatest positive impact and has become vital to monitor progress. Accurate, timely statistics become essential for decision and policy makers in understanding health trends of the population at large, to develop appropriate policies, allocate resources and prioritize interventions. Monitoring and evaluating health measures, have given required additional and improved surveillance and enhancing the scope and quality of information and standardize processes at the global level. The timely, reliable, accessible data and measurements to improve preparedness, prevention and response to

8 Paul Nuki, "Two New Waves of Deaths are about to Break over the NHS, New Analysis Warns," *Telegraph*, April 25, 2020.

9 Karina Reiss & Sucharit Bhakdi, *Corona False Alarm? – Facts and Figures* (London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2020), 23.

10 Andrew Kaufman, et al., *Essential Guide to Covid* (Vaccines Revealed, 2021), 26.

health crisis, have become crucial to have determined and effective strategies to mitigate and suppress the continuation of the pandemic over the coming years.

The early conclusions were that corona viruses are viruses from winter time, so warmer weather seasons would subside its spread, which were proven wrong in the bygone year of 2020.¹¹ The public health initiatives with antiviral developments would help. The different political and economic conspiracy theories do the round among the people;¹² but one is clear that the coronavirus outbreak is a real healthcare tragedy happening all around the globe and what is urgently needed in the absence of proper medication and treatment is management of the situation with right guidance and preventive care.¹³ As of now, there is no medicine for Covid-19; the prevention is better than cure and self-care and practice of personal hygiene boost immunity and respiratory health.¹⁴ Classical viral vaccines are designed to make our immune systems produce antibodies. When a new virus enters the body and causes illness, the immune system responds by mobilizing these arms of defence. Recognising the invading virus from the long-term memory, the body is enabled to encounter the re-invasion of the virus by generating different antibodies. With these antibodies an individual is believed to become immune to the virus.

4 Integral Approach to Health Care and Safety

Alternative medicines from traditional health practices and health care systems advocate lifestyle changes to boost immunity. The traditional extensive knowledge in Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) is based on preventive care, and on principle of medicines having capability of curing the fundamental cause of the sickness, not merely treating the symptoms. Prevention and good immunity remain top priority as the Ayurvedic objectives speak of decreasing the disorders of diseased person and maintenance of the health of healthy person.¹⁵ Many of the traditional solutions given out of experience and medical practices by individuals without much

11 Sidney Osler, *Coronavirus Outbreak* (Kindle edition, 21 Feb 2020), 83.

12 James Perloff, *Covid-19 and the Agendas to come Red-Pilled* (Burlington: Refuge Books, 2020), 189.

13 Mini Garg, *Coronavirus – Theories, Definition, Origin, Symptoms, Treatments and Prevention* (May 2020) Miniwrites.com.

14 Shakeer Ahmed, *Coronavirus: Facts and Prevention* (Hyderabad: Inspire Educational Society, 2020), 8.

15 Jooti Gangwal, et al., "Covid-19: Scope of Ayurveda and Homoeopathy to Make Swastha Bharat," in *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, Vol.4. Issue 4 (May-June 2020), 34-39.

of empirical evidences, data and proven statistics. The number of solutions to fight the disease of Covid-19 are drawn from the similar type of illnesses affecting people all over the world.¹⁶ Many sought spiritual preparation along with medical aid, feeling powerlessness to face the situation and to solve the crisis.¹⁷

‘Stay home; stay safe’ has become the slogan in everyone’s mouth for about a year in the world. The proven health measures like keeping hands clean, practising sneezing and coughing safely, opening windows, wearing mask and continuing physical distancing, have been advised to be followed for safety of everyone. While the safety of vaccines is also questioned, the medical and scientific assurances have been given that the approved vaccines have been tested with wide range of people including a broad age range, both sexes, different ethnicities, geographical conditions, and with those with medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, pulmonary, liver and kidney disease and chronic infections.¹⁸ Although there is a fear and suspicion about the competitiveness in the vaccine productions by different private players in the industry, the program of vaccination has been an urgent and immediate action needed.

The question of safety indeed posed an incredible challenge in a global pandemic context where not only trusted scientific and medical information are available, but lots of misinformation as well. The mixed information confuses not only the public but also health and political authorities as well, leading to a compromise in safety concerns. Some termed it as ‘infodemic’ that guides wrongly and misleads falsely the ordinary people without knowing the intricacies of health science. Choosing between credible information and confusing misinformation is the priority over the safety of population. The delicate balance between what is known and yet to be known in any scientific research and development has to be kept up in people’s thinking, which would enable to inspire trust and confidence in appropriate medical interventions in difficult situation as Covid-19. For, scientific knowledge is always empirical, experimental and evolving. The new situation of pandemic posed such a challenge of not deriving from previously known knowledge or from an ‘a priori’ stock of knowledge. For instance, the new platform of

16 Jagdish Krishnanlal Arora, *Corona Virus and Covid-19* (Nashik: Ekta Greenville, 2020), 3.

17 Milos Bogdanovic, *Meeting the Coronavirus – Psychophysical and Spiritual Preparation*, 5. www.enlite.org.

18 “Safety of COVID-19 Vaccines,” published 31 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/safety-of-covid-19-vaccines> accessed on 4th April, 2021.

vaccination like the mRNA vaccines has been developed step up step for its efficacy and safety, quality of manufacturing, certification and distribution. None can compromise on safety.

5 Humanizing Vaccine Technology

The immunization programme targeting the vaccine-preventable diseases, has been a great success story in health of global population, saving millions of lives from life-threatening major killers like diarrhoea, cholera, malaria, typhoid and Ebola, etc., And the global community hopes to see the same effect of prevention and saving millions from succumbing to the corona virus, through effective vaccination programme starting few months ago in various countries across the globe, through routinely prioritizing the population from the affected, the aged, the vulnerable and the general public, protecting health among people of all ages, races and nations.

Medically, any vaccine develops an instruction to natural immune system in human body by inducing a tiny viral property against which bodily resistance would naturally learn to react. Having learnt the dynamics of developing an anti-body system for expelling unwanted species in the body, or for accommodating the viral properties in the body without causing damage to the physical system, the human body is enriched to produce fighters in the future if there would be any situation exposed to the virus. The well-established and time-tested platform of vaccine technology, conventionally used inactivated virus. Some Covid-19 vaccines, for instance COVAXIN used in India, have used the known method of vaccination as above. The inactivated vaccine has been using *whole-virion inactivated verocell*, which do not replicate, as they contain dead virus, incapable of infecting but able to instruct immune system to produce a self-defensive reaction against an infection.¹⁹ Such vaccines have proved efficacy trials along the pre-clinical studies with demonstration of strong immunogenicity and protective efficacy in non-human species and along the human clinical trials with observation of vaccine-induced antibody systems and of enhanced humoral and cell-mediated immune response.

Unlike the known vaccines of the old diseases, few Covid-19 vaccines have been developed with an approach using messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA). Although the mRNA vaccine technology is not completely new, some Covid-19 vaccines using methods of mRNA, have been still on testing process

19 Refer "COVAXIN – India's First Indigenous COVID-19 Vaccine," <https://www.bharatbiotech.com/covaxin.html>. Accessed 11 April 2021.

for their efficacy in prevention of pandemic. A decade old careful study of the mRNA vaccine technology against diseases of Zika, rabies and influenza, have been rigorously assessed for their efficacy as a long-lasting immune response in human beings. Contrary to the known methods of vaccination by administering muted live virus or bacteria causing diseases, to improve immunity and resistance capacity of human body, many other Covid-19 vaccines like Moderna, Pfizer used new mRNA vaccine technology. These mRNA vaccines have been rigorously assessed for safety, and clinical trials have shown that they provide a long-lasting immune response. The mRNA vaccines are not live virus vaccines and do not interfere with human DNA.²⁰

Medical community's commitment to research and development for new vaccines for emerging disease like Covid-19 is praiseworthy. Although faced with challenges to ensure the availability of life-saving vaccines for all, WHO warns of neglecting the large majority of population in many countries affected by conflict, poverty and fragility. Receiving immunization and other essential health service for Covid-19, vaccination coverage has to inevitably ensure protection of communities from being affected with waves of diseases. Ensuring the health systems to be equitable in their delivery of services, needs vision and strategy and cooperation of all organizations, governments, academia, vaccine manufacturers and distribution partners, for immunization success to improve coverage of all.

Building stronger surveillance system for vaccination through identifying, tracking and monitoring disease outbreaks and improved antimicrobial resistance among population through vaccination coverage, have poised challenges across the globe for a new vision with global focus for immunization to all communities. Although the ambitious goal to immunize the entire global population against the virus needs investment to intensify the fight against the new and emerging diseases like Covid-19, fighting against vaccine hesitancy and breaking through on stagnation in reaching out to majority of population also need to be prioritized. Medical scientists have to be vocal and transparent in detailing the test results and reports of success rates of vaccination, clearing the doubts among the population over the effectiveness of the process of vaccination. While virus variants worry medical scientists, especially the double mutants,²¹ with their vaccine escape property, increased transmissibility and fuelling the record number of cases with massive surge,

20 Refer, "Safety of COVID-19 vaccines," <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/safety-of-covid-19-vaccines>. Accessed on 4th April, 2021.

21 L.Enjuanes, ed., *Coronavirus: Replication and Reverse Genetics* (Berlin: Springer, 2005).

the global human community has to go ahead continuing primary health care and universal health coverage with life-saving vaccines for all.

6 Human Cost of Clinical Trials

The cost paid by clinical trials is actually tens of thousands of people who are consciously volunteering themselves and millions in poorer countries have been forced involuntarily and been used as human trials.²² Many conspiracy theories have concluded saying that the ever rising cases of contamination and deaths in several poorer populations, stand as witness to such human trials openly done in terms of testing and caring of potential patients affected by the virus. Human right concerns have also been raised by many Rights groups, suspecting the rise of cases among marginalised communities such as racially discriminated groups, migrants, refugees in developed countries, while the same has been a concern about the overall rise of cases in developing and highly populated countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia, etc.²³ Safety of Covid-19 vaccines has been a great concern throughout the world. The suspicion over the series of explainers given by organizations and companies on vaccine development and distribution, has only grown more and more. The reports of recurring cases of infection for the persons who have been administered the vaccines, have only worried the general population about their effectiveness in both prevention and controlling of the spread of the pandemic.

The health organizations are very vocal about ensuring safety and equitable access from the moment when countries around the world announced their plans of rolling out the vaccines. Working with authorities across the globe, the WHO has taken up safety and monitoring of development and implementation of standard, safe and effective vaccines. The highest priority of global organization like WHO has been to give approvals for carefully tested and monitored vaccines against known characters of the virus and the emerging strands of new variants.²⁴ Key topic of interest for the players in all levels of pharmaceuticals, government authorities, health officials and

22 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and Europol, *EU Drug Markets: Impact of Covid-19* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, May 2020), 8.

23 Refer for example, Biswaroop Roy Chowdhury, *Corona: The Scandal of the Millennium*. Delhi: India Book of Records, 2020; Karina Reiss & Sucharit Bhakdi, *Corona False Alarm? – Facts and Figures* (London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2020).

24 *World Health Statistics 2020: Monitoring Health for the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva: WHO, 2020), 7-11.

business tycoons, has been various claims of safety and effectiveness of each of their choice of vaccines. No wonder to suspect the monetary benefits and economic concerns of each player in the field of vaccination programmes. So far millions of people have safely received different vaccines, carefully tested, duly approved and constantly monitored. History of medical intervention in cases of new diseases humanity has faced so far, has recorded the facts that all vaccines including Covid-19 vaccines, become effective only after a rigorous, multi-stage testing process, involving small to large scale clinical trials, specifically designed to ensure both safety and efficacy. By then, the human cost of it is very high.

7 Inhuman Face of Pharmaceutical Business

Flouting the medical ethical codes of clinical trial methods have been wide openly seen from the start of the pandemic since December 2019. Having less regard for the human values and utilisation of vulnerable population, many pharmaceutical corporate companies regard the pandemic only as a business opportunity. Special safety designs for clinical trials have been easily overruled by both the health and political authorities who have self-declared the pandemic crisis as an emergency and urgent necessary intervention. Such move has only given them monopolizing, unilateral and authoritarian policy making powers, as in times of war and calamities, side-lining all normal democratic process of debating and passing of any law. With unbridled freedom of policy makers, the pharma corporate business has been helped directly capitalize on the trials and approvals of their products.²⁵

Panel of experts, advisory groups, and medical analysts have only become closed groups in support of authoritarian regimes. Recommendations by the group of officials have been enabled to be taken as approvals for use and for developing policies for vaccine manufactures. An ongoing struggle has been witnessed in monitoring any safety concerns and basic human values in clinical trials, administration of vaccines and medical care interventions. In all these baton struggles against pandemic, humanity of this historic period have witnessed the inhuman face of pharmaceutical companies and their favouring policy makers in the national governments.

8 Virus Variants and Changing Nature of Being

The biggest question among the people reveals the curiosity of knowing whether the Covid vaccines provide protection against new variants. Medical

25 Melissa Harrison, *Covid-19: Pandemic, Profit, Fallout* (Australia: Harrison Publications, 2020), 121-123.

and biological sciences proclaim that it is not unusual for any virus to change itself. As scientific community of medical professionals, virologists and immunologists have observed, among many changes in the nature of Sars-Cov-2 virus for about more than a year, two particular variants pose challenges to the global health care of human population. Both the variants identified in UK and in South Africa towards end of 2020, have one thing in common as we call it the N501Y mutation. These variants and many other suspected and reported variants in Brazil and in India, have increased the spread of virus, meaning that the transmission rate has been substantially high. The risk of rapid contamination and communicability of the disease worried the medical practitioners. The sudden increase in cases in these countries after the identification of the variants, have caused considerable warning and urgent appeal for measuring of containing the spread.

To prevent these more transmissible and infectious variants, although they do not pose very serious conditions of illness, or a higher death rate, or any sort of different clinical manifestations of symptoms and uneasiness, the vaccine developers have taken note of the changing nature of the circulating strains of the virus. The global coordination with shared medical and scientific inputs would enable develop effective vaccines and enhance the structure of the vaccines for boosting the immune response in the human body. For Sars-Cov-2, we are still in learning and observing process with our medical knowledge still evolving for appropriate response. Most scientists believe that the present vaccines which have elicited a host of antibodies and cell-mediated immune responses successfully, would be able to work against the new variants as of now.

Therefore, medical assessment of couple of changes and mutations in the present virus projects a view that the current roll out of vaccination programme would not be made ineffective against these variants. Given the contemporary capability in the medical field, the vaccine development could quickly adapt to the changes in the composition of the antigens and the vaccines. With new evidences coming everyday our knowledge and response ability have improved in reacting in real time to protecting the humanity from failing. Change is the nature. The perennial question is still valid why do humans alone conceive the nature to be a permanent being. The only constant is the change, nothing else. Becoming is the Nature.

9 Human Corporeality, Creative Ability to Resiliency

That the human beings are fundamentally corporeal has once again come to be affirmed in Covid situation. In the wake of changes in lifestyle during the pandemic, learning to listen to one's body and empowering human

body's natural intelligence, a profound shift in health awareness emerges. "... the body asks us to look well beyond logic-based thinking into deeper constructs."²⁶ John Kortum argues that human biological, physical and health properties of immunity strength is connected to blood and lymphatic system, and that they hold our capacity for closeness, connection and quality of life. He uses 'intimacy' as not merely romantic, psychological act of love, but closeness to one's own physique. He explains 'intimacy' as the capacity to cause others to feel and to allow others to cause us to feel. While social precautions, self-quarantine, isolation of patients, virtual connection through communication technology without physical closeness of other people, are everyday experiences now, what is intimate to one's own self is one's body.²⁷ From those who recovered from Covid-19, we learnt that the cure-*mantra* is connecting with one's own body, listening to the body's message and fortifying one's own immune system. The human corporal body affirms that true health always coming from within and its recommends active intimacy to sustain a lifetime health and optimal immunity function.

Secondly, while the routine is said to be important for consistency, physical recovery and replenishment, human beings have learnt to do the otherwise. Ability to restruct and creative aptitude to adapt to new condition, have not been forgotten. New perspective with capacity to move beyond limits of crushing situation continue to facilitate human endeavours.²⁸ With surprise of many well-developed, technologically advanced and medically progressive societies in the twenty first century have been bombarded with the multiple and contradictory explanatory theories regarding the origin, transmission and treatment of the infectious disease. Faced with such competing and contradictory external messages, human trust on intuition has not failed most of the survivors of the pandemic. Regardless of what is happening in the outer world, the inner refuge helps many to enter a calm centre.

Surely, in the post-Covid-19 situations, the humanity would experience a hangover of confusion, uncertainties, insecurities and general overall anxiety.²⁹ As medical conditions have shown that the individuals recovering from the infection continue to experience for several weeks, head-spins, fogginess and confusion, the perpetual wave of Covid-19 chaos would make us realize that notion of normalcy has to be redefined considering both individual and

26 John Kortum, "Immunity and Intimacy: Empowering Health During COVID-19," *Monroe Journeys* (May 2020), 1.

27 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

28 Luigi Sciambarella, "COVID-19, Consciousness, Nightmares and Lucid Dreaming," *Monroe Journeys* (May 2020), 6.

29 Cara Hewett, "Collective Covid Hangover," *Monroe Journeys* (June 2020), 1.

collective mental and emotional health, alongside the return of stability of physical health.

The light at the end of the tunnel is blurry, as the global problem surges with paralysing efforts of looking for solutions desperately elsewhere in the professional and governmental agencies. Ability to look for our own coping mechanisms is not a foreign concept but is the biggest wake-up call more than a simple 'self-help advice.' The positive change comes from exploration of the self-potentiality beyond the programmed beliefs and dictated rationality. The situation of fear, anxiety, turmoil, uncertainty and negativity, has been on the rise, to maintain our sanity and normalcy, one must try on a new default thought with personal resiliency with powerful narrative of self-awareness and self-accomplishment.³⁰

Conclusion

Reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic period as uncommon and unprecedented time, we have witnessed that humanity has learned to adjust new social, personal routines. The medical and scientific inputs on the nature of the virus causing the pandemic, and on the ways of containing its transmission and ill effects, have been evolving ever since the start of the outbreak. While hailing the health care workers and frontline dedicated servants in attending to the patients, outright condemnation of opportunists in corporate and political circles has not been overstated for their inhuman approaches to the ailing and dying population. The effective vaccination program as best preventive method has an empowering opportunity with human biology's testimony of immunity health, human resiliency and creative ability to adapt and change to new situation. The post Covid-19 would surely make a stronger humanity in its evolutionary process. Change is the emerging key word and truth of becoming has seen the light of the day amidst the gloom of pandemic darkness.

30 Ibid; 3-4.

Covid-19: Revisiting Science, Spirituality and Humanity

Stephen Jayard

Abstract:

The pandemic of Covid-19 has shaken, and is still shaking, the whole world. Besides the loss of lives of millions, innumerable people have been severely affected by it. The pandemic-virus, about which the world of science is not sure whether it is living or non-living, has yet taught us several lessons to us, those who are still living. We are forced to change our lifestyles, to change how we treat one another, how we look at nature and deal with our environment, how we learn and teach, how we understand religion and spirituality, and how we value values and valuables. This article looks at the whole scenario of Covid-19 as a clarion call to revisit our notions of Science, Spirituality and Humanity at large. Neither unrealistic hopes for science, nor hostility to science, really helps to achieve total welfare of humanity. Spirituality must not be confused with religion, though religion can be its source. Genuine spirituality will not give in to sectarianism and racism. Humanity, as a whole, cannot survive unless it learns to collaborate for collective and holistic living. Though the world has lost many things due to the pandemic, yet it stands to learn a lot from it.

Keywords: *Impacts, science, spirituality, humanity, holistic living.*

Introduction

Covid-19: A buzz word that shocks and terrifies the whole world these days. By December 2019, China officially declared that a new type of Corona virus is attacking its State, Wuhan. Covid-19 is said to be rather a large virus at the dimension of from 20 to 400 nm. [A Nano-metre is 10^{-9} metre, that is, one

meter, divided by one billion or 100 crores times].¹ The most surprising thing about a virus is that we can't even determine whether it is a living organism or a non-living matter; nevertheless, this tiny thing has taught humanity great lessons. One of the important lessons of Covid-19 is, as this article seeks to explore, a serious invitation to revisit our erstwhile understanding of Science, Spirituality and Humanity.

Science does play a prominent place in our society. It has permeated the human psyche as an authoritative enterprise. But in the recent decades it realizes its limits and limitations; it pays serious attention in fathoming what life is; it is busy with the mysteries of the universe; it overcomes its attitude of 'arrogance' and beings to appreciate the face and value of ignorance.² Spirituality, which is often identified with religion, must enable us to disentangle itself from the clutches of sectarianism and racism and to move to the level of genuine spirituality. It is high time that religion moved from institution to intuition; it focused more on rootedness than on rules and regulations; it learnt to see God in people and nature, and not just in the Holy Books and Sacred Places. Humanity, as a whole, cannot survive unless it learns to collaborate for collective and holistic living. Though humanity have lost many things due to the pandemic, yet it stands to learn a lot from it. Humanity has been taught to move from individualism to collectivism; to move from valuing valuables to value human and divine values; to stress on one's being rather than one's having.

1 Revisiting Science

Recent developments in the fields of Philosophy of Science, Sociology of Science, and Ethics of Science have corrected the erroneous or one-sided understanding of science. Up and until the beginning of the 20th century science is seen as the custodian of all rationality and the final authority in every domain of our lives. There is no further appeal once science has uttered

1 Elsewhere I have given a little more of the basic details of the Covid-19 virus. See: "CORONA: Living or Non-Living? Yet Lessons for the Living," in *Have Courage: I am With you – Christian Responses to Covid-19*, ed. by Kuruvilla Pandikattu, SJ (New Delhi & Papal Seminary Media House, Pune, 2020), 72 – 80. Some ideas of this paper are also discussed over there.

2 For more discussion on this concept of ignorance, see my paper: "Can Ignorance be Ignored" – Existential Reflections on Ignorance from Philosophy of Science Perspectives", in *Science-Religion Dialogue and Its Contemporary Significance – Interdisciplinary Essays in Honour of Professor K. Pandikattu*, ed. Binoy Pichalakattu (Bengaluru: ATC Publications, 2018), 257 – 274.

its final verdict on any matter. But now it is realized that science, though very powerful and successful, is just one way of approaching reality; there are several dimensions to our life and reality that lie beyond the scope of science as such. As science has its own limits and limitations of various types, like epistemological, technological, practical, existential, ontological etc., it can never take human destiny into its hands. In short, the scope of science is limited and it is increasingly realized that the need to interact with other disciplines, like philosophy, religion, ethics and so on. It has been thought that science is not bound by values, but only by facts. Now that the very dichotomy between facts and values has been questioned, we are taught that science is value-bound. Science is basically a social enterprise, though it relies upon observation and objectivity, experiments and analysis, methods and inference and so on. Consensus of the scientific community also matters. Science, being a social enterprise, has to take all that affects human society seriously. It is bound by values and moral principles; scientists are not mechanical agents set-apart to pursue scientific researches, but humans, living in society, being affected by all that affect other fellow humans; they are not just rational people but reasonable people; science is not just a rational enterprise but a reasonable enterprise.

1.1 From Haughty Science to Humble Science

Humility³ is no more seen as a mere religious or spiritual value; it has permeated itself to the spirit and thinking of any thinking person, including scientists. The challenges of the current pandemic have made humility a natural emotion for anyone who reflects upon the helplessness of humanity. Corona, such a tiny and mysterious virus poses an indomitable challenge to the world of science. In fact, science has even measured the unimaginably huge universe; it has managed to learn that the invisible universe is much larger than the visible one; the known universe is housing two trillion individual galaxies, and the number of stars in them is more than that of the grains of sand on the entire planet earth; the diameter of the known universe is 93 billion light years across (93×10^{21} km). The unknown universe is 150 sextillions (150×10^{21}) times bigger than the known universe. However, we become so helpless that we have, so to say, to surrender to this little virus. Even the developed countries feel very abandoned and overwhelmed in dealing with this menace;

3 Humility, as I see, is a deeper awareness that we depend on the Creator, nature and one another for the very possibility of our lives. This awareness will positively shape our thoughts, words and actions. Though a non-believer may not be happy to include the element of 'Creator' in the list of our dependence but the pandemic-reality will, perhaps, make him / her rethink that idea.

they just throw their hands up in total surrender. Glorious economic powers and mighty military powers don't make any sense to this invisible agent. Is it another instance to show that the invisible determines the visible?⁴

Though science aims to explain everything, it has to face some boundaries where it cannot go further; it has to accept some brute facts as unexplainable. Every explanation is done with the help of something already known or explained; but it cannot go *ad infinitum* and that implies 'incompleteness of explanation'. Everything in our lives cannot be quantified or mathematized. The degree of beauty or humour, the levels of suffering and joy, the grade of satisfaction or attraction, the genuineness of religious or trance experiences, for instance, cannot be accurately quantified.

In the world of Quantum Physics, there have been efforts for a few decades to arrive at 'the theory of everything (TOE) but they have not been successful. Even if a successful TOE is obtained, will it really explain everything, including life, satisfaction, joy, sacrifice, love etc., that do play a major role in human lives. For instance, the discussions on the notion of life get more and murkier as sciences advance.

1.2 From Dominating Science to Dialoguing Science

In the modern times great thinkers from the diverse fields of Cosmology, Astronomy, Physical and Chemical sciences, Bio-sciences, Metaphysics and Theology, agree that the more we know about the less and less, the mysterious dimensions of nature stare at us. Particle Physics and Quantum Physics have drastically changed, how we look at the basic building blocks of reality and life. The wave-and-particle nature of reality astonishes the researchers, so much so, many of them easily see a "hand of divinity" in the creation. Cosmology and Theology come closer; the dividing line between them gets thinner and thinner; they are no more seen as two separate independent disciplines as they are intrinsically inter-twined. As American Physicist William Stoeger puts it: "... Contemporary Cosmology is fascinating precisely because it has such intricate logical relations with traditional metaphysical and theological issues."⁵

4 As sciences develop humanity is increasingly realizing that the visible world is determined by the invisible, in all possible worlds; for instance, the physical world is determined by the four invisible fundamental physical forces, both at the sub-atomic and cosmic levels; the galaxies in the incredibly vast dark universe are determined by the invisible black holes, and even our very words and actions of our day-to-day lives are determined (or shaped) by the invisible emotions, convictions, beliefs and value-systems.

5 William Stoeger, "Cosmology and Theology" *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, accessed on October 17, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmology-theology/>.

T. D. Singh, a pioneer in *Science-Religion Dialogue* from the Indian thought perspectives, suggests, “A sincere attempt to understand life [...] is of foundational importance and it will have important relevance in deciding the relation between science and religion.” Erwin Schrodinger, a quantum physicist wonders, in his book, *What is Life?* (1944). *Science Journal* (July 2005) lists out 125 questions which cannot be answered by modern science; for instance, ‘How and where did life on earth arise?’ – and still more intriguing question is, ‘What is that life?’, Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, a Hungarian Nobel Laureate and Biochemist, who discovered vitamin C, declares, “In my search for the secret of life, I ended up with atoms and electrons, which have no life at all. Somewhere along the line, life has run out through my fingers.”⁶

Sciences may be able to separate all bio-chemicals like nucleic acids (RNA, DNA), carbohydrates, lipids, enzymes and all other basic building blocks of organic bodies but will they ever discover what is that which gives life to them? It is said that more than fifty minerals, salts and chemicals are essential for life and the ratio of their combination is also very crucial for the holistic health of our body; for instance, if sodium is more, it damages blood vessels and increases blood pressure and causes other heart diseases; but if it is less, it causes low blood pressure, damages nerve cells, the muscles of the heart and digestive systems. The most fascinating fact is that all these chemicals are ‘lifeless’ in themselves, but still they are necessary to make life possible!

It is generally understood that *a living being* is made up of cellular organization; it needs nutrition, respiration; it grows and develops, moves, reproduces, responds to stimuli; further it maintains homeostasis, stability and constant internal conditions; metabolism takes place in it; having organ systems to carry out different functions of the being. *A non-living being* is made up of atoms and sub-atomic particles; it does not need food for energy to perform activities; it does not grow in size or develop into something else; it does not eat or excrete, nor reproduce or multiply. *A dead being* is an organism that once had life, but now no pulse; eyes are dilated, body is cold, emitting foul odour, muscles become rigid and start decomposing. Further, in the medical world, two types of death are recognized: *Somatic Death* – involving stoppage of respiration, circulation of blood and brain functions, and *Molecular Death* – involving the death of all organs, at different times; while liver dies rapidly, heart takes sixty minutes and cornea takes six hours to die. There is obviously a time-gap between these two types of death; all living beings will undergo these two types death.

6 Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, “Life, as such, does not exist” accessed March 27, 2021. <http://www.eoht.info/page/Albert%20Szent-Gyorgyi>.

Regarding the status of virus there is an alarming ambiguity! One cannot easily decide whether it is a living or a non-living being. It manifests some signs of life like multiplying when it is parasitic to another living cell (of a plant/animal), but left alone in the environment it cannot respond to stimuli, it assumes a crystalline form, cannot grow or multiply or reproduce. Outside a living cell it cannot survive, because it cannot create energy and there is no 'agency' to reach out to food, nor is there any metabolism (unlike bacteria, amoebas); some scientists consider virus as a missing link between non-life and life.

Biologists of the recent times tend to move towards a belief in the creator for the universe. For instance, Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley, and Roger Olsen published *The Mystery of Life's Origin: Reassessing Current Theories* where they strongly suggest that having a Creator would be the best explanation for what we now discover. Phillip Johnson, a professor of law at the University of California at Berkeley, published *Darwin on Trial* argues that scientists like to support Darwinism and Neo-Darwinism because of the human tendency to look for only natural causes for all scientific explanations. According to John Collins⁷ intelligent design need not be anti-evolutionism, for even if the theory of evolution is proved to be true, it implies that there must have been something in the first place, from which the universe evolved.

That is why, even today, the notion of life and its origin are very mysterious. Werner Arber, a renowned biologist, after a long research on the intelligent design, makes an honest confession that "I must confess that I don't understand how life came about... The most primitive cell may require at least several hundred different specific biological micro-molecules. How such already quite complex structure may have come together, remains a mystery to me. The possibility of the existence of a creator, of God, represents to me a satisfactory solution to this problem."⁸ It is not necessary that all scientists see the developments in science as a challenge to religion or faith. More discoveries in the micro and the macro worlds point to intricate designs which point to the Creator. For instance, Collins, though he agrees that science can't prove or disprove God's existence and it can only point to the existence of the Divine, the scientific discoveries are seen as opportunity to worship; he mentions three

7 John Collins, *Faith of Scientists* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003).

8 Werner Arber, "The Existence of a Creator Represents a Satisfactory Solution", in *Cosmos, Bios, Theos: Scientists Reflect on Science, God, and the Origins of the Universe, Life, and Homo Sapiens* ed. Margenau, H. and R. A. Varghese (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992), 142-143. Accessed on 17 April, 2020. <https://www.icr.org/articles/print/4095/>.

such pointers: the fact why there is something at all rather than nothing; the ability of mathematics to capture the deeper dimensions of reality; and the event of the Big Bang—out of nothingness as we have not observed nature creating itself.⁹

With due admiration and respect to science, we dearly expect science to collaborate with other disciplines to enrich humanity. It is high time that we realized, as Philip Clayton declares, “... science alone will never provide the answer.”¹⁰ To look for the meaning of life merely in scientific endeavours will be like looking for the right thing in a wrong place, or the wrong thing in a right place... but in both the cases, we will be the losers! *Why should we, as rational beings, who are able to develop sciences, be the losers after all?*

2 Revisiting Spirituality

The pandemic has shaken the faith of several believers. Many believers have unfortunately lost their faith, hope and meaning in their lives. Spirituality is often identified with holy places and rituals. During the lockdown, believers could not have access to all these and that created a sort of vacuum in them. Many are forced to check their understanding of spirituality.

2.1 Freeing Spirituality from the Clutches of Religion

Spirituality may originate from religion but it is not confined by the traditional structures of religions. Religion in the modern times are bogged down so much with the institutional and dogmatic dimensions that it has lost the touch with the transcendence; it has not succeeded in transforming its members. Religion, as Philip Goldberg argues, must focus, among other things, on *transformation* and *transcendence*: “... to foster maturation and on-going growth, helping people to become more fulfilled and more complete; and to satisfy the longing to expand the perceived boundaries of the self, become more aware of the sacred aspect of life, and experience union with the ultimate ground of Being.”¹¹

Spirituality can emerge from admiring nature. Already in sixteenth and seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler was convinced that God speaks through

9 Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

10 Philip Clayton, “Foreword,” in *Science and the Search for Meaning – Perspectives from International Scientists*, ed. Jean Staune (US: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), xvi.

11 Philip Goldberg, “Towards Broader Understanding of Religion’s Functions,” *The Huffington Post*, April 21, 2010, accessed on June 2, 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-goldberg/toward-a-broader-understa_b_545314.html.

both the Scripture and Nature; as priests reveal God embedded in the Scriptures, astronomers reveal God housed in Nature; therefore astronomers are also, in a way, priests; in his own words: “God manifests himself not only in the words of the Scriptures but also in the wonderful arrangement of the universe and in its conformity with the human intellect.”¹² He could easily see divinity in the reality around and he considered the universe ‘the temple of God’; the world and the soul are the corporeal and non-corporeal images of God respectively.

Covid-19 has made the whole world to come to a stand-still; it has closed the worship places down; it has silenced the noises of the ultra-modern world; it has caused the downfall of the economy; transports have been halted. Yes, it is a big blow to humanity, which has been assuming that it is in control of everything, including its own destiny. But humanity is now forced to look for wisdom and discernment to find out what the real fulfilment in life is; it is time to listen to the *inner voice*; perhaps, we can now hear it very loudly as the external noise is forced to be silent. Even a cursory look at this scenario teaches a person, and every nation to learn grow in genuine spirituality, even without visiting the worship places and undertaking the traditional pietistic practices; they need to learn to be concerned about one another even behind the locked doors. To be genuinely spiritual means the ability to see God in the sufferings of humanity; it is the ability to love even those whom we don’t like. True spirituality trusts in the love and mercy of God. To be spiritual means being firm, without being harsh; being principle-oriented, without being arrogant; being compassionate without being compromising and being humble without reducing oneself to nothingness.

2.2 Spirituality – Oriented towards Mystery

The term mystery means more than just something to be unfathomable or unexplainable. As Gabriel Marcel¹³ looks at mystery as something deeply significant and its meaning cannot be fully grasped but only apprehended to a certain extent. Once we meet with a mystery we are led to deeper aspects of it; it takes us beyond. To find whether there is life in the Moon is a problem but to understand life on the earth is a mystery; to know the number of my friends is a problem, but to be sure of their loyalty to me is a mystery; to enumerate the physical details of death is a problem but to understand it is a mystery!

12 Johannes Kepler, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*; First published Mon May 2, 2011; substantive revision Sep 17, 2021, accessed on 17 Oct, 2021.2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kepler/>.

13 Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (South Bend: Ind., St. Augustine’s Press, 2001).

Spirituality must soar high from squabbles about pietistic activities, code, creed and cult; it needs to focus more on the mysterious dimensions. Even the world of science is becoming more aware of the mysterious nature of the universe, as the recent sciences “radically alter the status of knowledge and the place of the knowing subject.”¹⁴ *The mysterious nature of matter*: Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty and Bohr’s principle of complementarity suggest that the actual nature of reality escapes our complete understanding, because, “The elementary particle is neither a wave nor a corpuscle but a ‘thing’ that combines the two images.”¹⁵ Therefore, at that level, matter ceases to be ‘material’ and “[m]atter has lost its substance.”¹⁶ *The Mystery of the ‘Fine-tuning’*: The study of biotic coincidences and the anthropic principles seems to suggest that the universe has been very meticulously fine-tuned to be ready to receive conscious human beings; being convinced of this Freeman Dyson asserts that “the universe knew we were coming”¹⁷, and Paul Davies declares that “[w]e are truly meant to be here.”¹⁸ If one argues that all these fine-tunings are just fixed by laws of physics, then the question arises: “Where do laws of physics come from? And why *those* laws rather than some other set?”¹⁹ Fine-tuning in the universe, though may not be a proof, yet it is a strong indicator for an intelligent design behind the universe; for instance, the initial density of the universe had to be meticulously fixed to an accuracy of 10^{-60} and this precision is like an archer hitting a one-centimeter-square target placed fifteen billion light-years away.²⁰ Several scientists-turned theologians, like John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacock, Ilya Prigogine etc., also find something more to the evolution process than mere chance. They have gone beyond reductionism and are open to mystical and metaphysical overtones in their

14 Thierry Magnin, “Moral Philosophy – A Space for Dialogue between Science and Theology”, in *Science and the Search for Meaning – Perspectives from International Scientists*, ed. Jean Staune (PA, USA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 140.

15 *Ibid.*, 146.

16 Trinh Xuan Thuan, “Science and Buddhism,” in *Science and the Search for Meaning – Perspectives from International Scientists*, ed. Jean Staune (PA, USA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 181.

17 Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 250.

18 Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 232.

19 Paul Davies, “Glimpsing the Mind of God,” in *Science and the Search for Meaning – Perspectives from International Scientists*, ed. Jean Staune (PA, USA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006), 31.

20 Trinh Xuan Thuan, “Science and Buddhism,” 184. [Note: One light year is the distance travelled by light in one year’s time; by travelling the distance of about 300,000 KM per second, it covers about 9 trillion KM in one year; so the one cm target is at the total distance of 135×10^{21} KM !].

approach to reality. Even great minds, like Albert Einstein, are also convinced that such fine-tuning in the universe cannot be the outcome of a mere chance. Therefore the mystery still remains! Such a realization of mystery in nature, brought forth by science, will certainly enrich the domain of spirituality too.

In the post-pandemic days, we need to imbibe spirituality that would keep us virtuous, and therefore we can be free from anxiety; that would keep us wise and therefore we can be free from perplexity; that would keep us brave and therefore we can be free from fear; and spirituality that would keep us faithful and therefore be free from meaninglessness in life.

3 Revisiting Humanity

Humanity has been taught to sit back quietly and think about the deeper dimensions of the pandemic. In the modern world we don't have time to think as we over-engage ourselves busy with many things that don't really matter for the fullness of life. Though we may not say that only thinking is life, thinking is also very important in life! Only when we think and reflect, we grow in knowledge, in our humanness; only deep thinking makes us realize that for the fullness of our lives, we need God and others who have been created in his image and likeness; only such thinking enables us to have innovative ideas and new approaches towards new solutions! I would say, only when we *think*, we become thankful, humble, innovative, noble and knowledgeable... (What a coincidence!...When we put all the first letters of these words, it becomes *think!*). Genuine and deep thinking enables humans to move from valuing valuables to valuing values, to consider being as more important rather than having. Humanity is forced to think deeply and differently, genuinely and generously.

3.1 Moving from Horrible Egoism to Human Equality

Humans are now forced by the corona to feel equal to one another. Even the most powerful and developed countries have to kneel down in despair as things go out of their hands in dealing with the serious issues of Covid-19. Forgoing their pride they had to openly ask other countries for help and that once again reaffirmed the fact that we are all inter-dependent on one another. Though every nation and every race has been focusing on the differences to show its might over the others, to boss over others and to manipulate all possible ways to safeguard its own comfort zones, yet they are now taught a great lesson of equality, perhaps, in a tough way! The virus does not know the differences of regions or religions, colour or creed, rich or poor, wise or otherwise; it does

not discriminate against the developed or developing countries. After several centuries the rich and the affluent are taught to remind themselves of life's transience and fragility. Many of us have been living as if youth, health and wealth are the default settings of life, but humanity is now taught some basic lessons of life.

Every nation or race may have unique achievements and capacities but to the eyes of nature we all are same, vulnerable and equal. All natural forces are equally harsh or equally gentle to all humans, without any discrimination. Of course, we need to cherish the differences of various regions, languages, cultures, creeds and cultures, but we must not forget the indisputable fact that we are all basically equal, travelling in the same boat in the vast ocean of reality; as Pope Francis, in the context of corona-issues, reminds us that "all of us are fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together."²¹ Instead of focusing on the differences that keep us apart, humanity needs to focus on the factors that unite us, realizing that we are certainly equal.

In the context of the Second World War, Charlie Chaplin was very much affected to see the pathetic conditions of humanity; the greed and insensitivity on the part of the rich and the powerful towards the poor and the weak resulted in devastating loss of lives and properties. In March 1931, during his Berlin visit, Chaplin met Albert Einstein and discussed quantum theory, war, racism, religion, politics and Zionism. This visit, according to Chaplin himself, gave him clarity over his stands on political and economic matters. Both were deeply interested in propagating genuine humanism, the power of scientific reasons, freedom and collective wisdom. His speech in the film, *The Great Dictator* (1940) makes great sense even today, perhaps more than ever before; he invites humanity to focus on what unites us all rather than what divide; with deep anguish and anxiety he powerfully brings out the very essence of being human with dignity; he invites to have a deep trust in morality that dwells in the hearts of ordinary people; he cries out for democracy, tolerance and common sense:

I'm sorry, but I don't want to be an emperor. That's not my business. I don't want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone if possible Jew, Gentile, Black Man, White. We all want to help one another, human beings are like that

21 Pope Francis on Twitter, accessed October 25, 2021. <https://twitter.com/pontifex/status/1375787186629402626?lang=en>.

we want to live by each other's happiness, not by each other's misery. We don't want to hate and despise one another and this world has room for everyone, and the good Earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men's souls, has barricaded the world with hate, and has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in Machinery that gives us abundance has left us in want; our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much, and feel too little. More than machinery, we need humanity. More than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost. The airplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men – cries out for universal brotherhood – for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world – millions of despairing men, women, and little children – victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people. To those who can hear me, I say – do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed – the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress. The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people. And so long as men die, liberty will never perish Soldiers! Don't give yourselves to brutes – men who despise you, enslave you, who regiment your lives, who tell you what to do – what to think and what to feel! Who drill you – diet you – treat you like cattle, use you as cannon fodder. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men – machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines! You are not cattle! You are men! You have the love of humanity in your hearts! You don't hate! Only the unloved hate – the unloved and the unnatural! Soldiers! Don't fight for slavery! Fight for liberty! In the 17th Chapter of St Luke, it is written: "the Kingdom of God is within man" – not one man nor a group of men, but in all men! In you! You, the people have the power – the power to create machines. The power to create happiness! You, the people, have the power to make this life free and beautiful, to

make this life a wonderful adventure. Then – in the name of democracy – let us use that power – let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world – a decent world that will give men a chance to work – that will give youth a future and old age a security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power. But they lie! They do not fulfil that promise. They never will! Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people! Now let us fight to fulfil that promise! Let us fight to free the world – to do away with national barriers – to do away with greed, with hate and intolerance Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness Soldiers! In the name of democracy, let us all unite!²²

Conclusion

We don't unfortunately know how long it will take to develop a totally effective vaccine to prevent Covid-19, because even for HIV, we have not been able to invent a vaccine, even after a few decades! As we don't have the medicines to cure it, the best way is to be very cautious not to contract this virus. Several precautionary measures are to be taken individually and collectively, not to be infected by it, nor to contribute to the transmission of it. [Something interesting to think about: V _ R _ S. What is missing?... I and U... So, only U and I can kill the virus, by keeping ourselves away, and, in fact, we can give VRS (Voluntary Retirement from Service) to the virus!].

Of course, we need *social distancing* but that does not mean *emotional distancing*; we need not be emotionally and spiritually away from one another, especially with those infected with the virus, who are isolated... yet, we can still reach out to them by making calls to give them courage and hope; we can perhaps buy things for them, and if we don't meet or get in touch with them, we can leave the things at their doorstep. Sometimes a patient may die of this virus infection and other family members may be in the quarantine; they cannot even have the last look at their loved one, nor to give a fitting and loving farewell to the departed; in such situations we can always reach out emotionally and spiritually to them with phone calls, emails etc. to make them feel confident and courageous. It is high time that humanity realized that, during the lock-down period, everything is not locked down. Sunrise,

22 Chaplin's Speech to Humanity, in the film *The Great Dictator*, accessed January 12, 2021. <https://mindsetbooster.net/chaplins-speech-to-human-ity/>. Though democracy is not without limits, yet it is often better than other forms of governments, because it is more likely that the collective wisdom pays better.

breeze and rains are not locked down; love and friendship, family-time, kindness to the needy and a phone call to the lonely are not locked down; creativity, conversation, imagination, reading, care and relationship are not locked down; praying, meditation, sleeping. Work from home and above all, *hope* is certainly not locked down.

Though human beings have enormous cognitive power, they are cosmically very insignificant in the vast dark universe, known and unknown. As Bl     Pascal said: "Man is only a reed, frailer than nature, but he is a thinking reed. It does not need the whole universe to wipe him out; a breath, a drop of water, is enough to kill him..." But still humans are more powerful and noble than the universe, because, "he knows that he dies and knows the advantage the universe has over him,"²³ whereas the universe that kills him does not, and cannot know anything.

Nevertheless, let us not feel ashamed to learn lessons from the invisible Covid-19 virus. Though we don't even know whether a virus is a living being or not, it certainly has great lessons for us, the living beings; we learn once more that we are neither masters of our destiny nor slaves of harsh natural forces; we have before us a chance to co-create a new set of values, lifestyles and relationships. *Science* has to acquire a 'human face'. *Spirituality*, being freed from the clutches of religion, being aware of mysteries of life, must enable us to see divinity in all and all in divinity. *Humanity*, being convinced of equality, must begin to value values and not just the valuables, and to admire one's being, and not having.

23 Bl     Pascal, *Pensees*, ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Mercure de France, 1976), 231 & 145.

Egoity and Alterity during the Pandemic

George Panthanmackel, MSFS

Abstract:

Covid-19 has affected millions of peoples with far-reaching consequences on healthcare, economic and social situation. The people's response to the pandemic has largely been either 'egoitic' (self-centred), or 'alteritic' (other-centred). Emmanuel Levinas popularized the concept, 'alterity,' which is the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation. Despite his insistence upon the absolute character of transcendence of the Other, Levinas admits of a proximity of the Other in the 'face.' The alterity is the radical heterogeneity of the other. The face brings with it a trace of the infinity which we cannot know directly and fully. The Other person is irreducible to my experience of him/her, and so never present or co-present with me. Responsibility, as an order or command that I receive, does not originate with me, rather precedes me. It commands me to help the poor and needy. In order to help the poor people in this situation of crisis caused by the pandemic, for example, the Catholic Church in India, already on April 23, 2020, reached out to the poor affected by lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and was helping the affected people as best as she could. As many moved with genuine love and compassion for others, egos moved to serve the alters, there are also many persons who exploited the crisis for their selfish advantage, using alters (others) to serve egos.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, alterity, proximity, freedom, transcendence.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has affected our lives, our economy and nearly every corner of the globe. More than 5 billion vaccine doses have been given worldwide, or 67 per 100 people, but the worldwide numbers of infections continue to rise. The countries experiencing the largest outbreaks now include Botswana, Cuba, Israel, Iran, Malaysia and the United States. Presently

the impacts of Covid-19 in daily life are extensive and have far reaching consequences¹ on healthcare, economic and social situation. Consequences on Healthcare: challenges in the diagnosis, quarantine and treatment of suspected or confirmed cases; high burden of the functioning of the existing medical system; patients with other disease and health problems are getting neglected; overload on doctors and other healthcare professionals, who are at a very high risk; overloading of medical shops; requirement for high protection and disruption of medical supply chain. Consequences on Economic Activity: slowing of the manufacturing of essential goods; disruption of the supply chain of products; losses in national and international business; poor cash flow in the market and significant slowing down in the revenue growth. Consequences on Social Situation: service sector is not being able to provide their proper service; cancellation or postponement of large-scale sports and tournaments; avoiding the national and international travelling and cancellation of services; disruption of celebration of cultural, religious and festive events; undue stress among the population; social distancing with our peers and family members; closure of the hotels, restaurants and religious places; closure of places for entertainment such as movie and play theatres, sports clubs, gymnasiums, swimming pools, and so on and postponement of examinations.

The people's response to the pandemic has largely been either 'egoitic' (self-centred) or 'alteritic (other-centred).' Before we turn our attention to some of the instances of egoitic and alteritic responses, we shall reflect on the meaning of alterity in Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy popularized the concept.

1 Alterity in Levinas

The term alterity derives from the Latin word "*alter*," which means "other." In contemporary philosophy the question of the other is primarily that of the other human being, the Other (*Autrui*, in French), although some thinkers have raised the question of whether the human other should be privileged in this way. However, the central question governing philosophical discussions of alterity is not that of who the other is, but that of our access to alterity. Alterity is the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation.² Levinas also insists that intersubjectivity is asymmetrical: the other is always above me, calling me, commanding me. For Levinas, I can never make the Other fully present to myself. "The other is what I am not." This is the meaning of alterity. The engagement with the other is not an act of comprehension,

1 For this section, see www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc, Accessed on September 5, 2021.

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 251-253.

and does not result in co-presence. The critical moment in Levinas's argument is the identification and rejection of presence as the modality of the encounter of intentional consciousness with the Other.³

1.1. Alterity as Irreducibility to the Same

Levinas argues that ontology enacts a relationship with another being that reduces to the same. Instead, Levinas adopts an approach that does not reduce the other to the same, but considers the separation between oneself and the other as inherent in the relationship with Being. Levinas points out that Western philosophy has mostly been an ontology, an attempt at comprehending the being of what is, a reduction of the Other to the Same, a universality that crushes differences. The revelation of the face of the other is an ethical anchor by which the misuse of universality can be called into question through the experience of exteriority. The exteriority is how the individual transcends finite into the infinite. The exteriority is a relationship in which the self is separate from the other.⁴ The exteriority is a relationship where the being of self and other cannot be aggregated or fused to infinity, because they are completely separated. The exteriority is a state of being in which the self cannot be merged into a whole. The idea of the infinite is in itself a form of transcendence in relation to the Other.⁵

The other is absolutely other than the Self. The Other is other than oneself. The Other is infinitely transcendent reality. The idea of infinity requires the separation of the Same and the Other. This separation is a drop in the same and the other from the whole. Levinas distinguishes between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity. The idea of totality is trying to integrate all the different and the same in all, while the idea of infinity maintains separation between the other and the same. The idea of totality is all theoretical, while the idea of infinity is moral.⁶

1.2 Irreducibility as Trace in the Face

Despite his insistence upon the absolute character of the transcendence of the Other, Levinas admits of a 'visitation,' 'epiphany,' 'proximity,' of the Other in the 'face,' and the 'face-to-face' relationship. The alterity is the radical

3 Bettina Berge, "Emmanuel Levinas," [www. Plato. Stanford.edu](http://www.Plato.Stanford.edu), Accessed on September 14, 2021.

4 Rodolfo Jordon, "Levinas: Totality and Infinity Summary," [www. Philosophy tweet. blogspot.com](http://www.Philosophy.tweet.blogspot.com), Accessed on September 7, 2021.

5 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212-214.

6 *Ibid.*, 235-236.

heterogeneity of the other. The face brings with it a trace of the infinity which we cannot know directly, the face that places a demand on us prior to all moral reasoning, an irreducible trace in the face. It is a demand that rises from the alterity of the other. The Other's face manifests a trace, which 'shines as face of the other.' The trace lights up as the face of a neighbour. The glow of a trace distinguishes it from mere appearance or phenomena.⁷

Face to face is an ethical relationship. Language begins with the presence of the face with the expression. Language is a system of interaction in which meaning is derived from the face of the Other. Face, this absolutely other, is not a negation of the self. The presence of the Other does not contradict the freedom of self. I can kill the other, but his face reminds me of my responsibility. In killing the other, the other espaces the same. Being forbidden to kill does not mean murder is impossible.⁸

The alterity of the other person, which awakes the principle of transcendence in the ontological subject, is described as the face. The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity. The face of the other is an irreducible difference, an appearance in the world which disorders the world, worries me and keeps me awake. A face is the presentation of an entity, and not a representation. It does not expose, nor does it conceal an entity, but expresses the entity. The expression invites one to speak to someone. The face makes present the ever new imperative, be responsible. The face of the other in the ethical relation expresses moral power. Moral power is essentially non-aggressive. The face of the other calls me to responsibility without negating me.⁹

Face of the other is how the Other reveals itself. The face of the other is the exteriority of his being. Face to face is an ethical relationship, and calls the freedom of self-responsibility. Language begins with the presence of the face with the expression. Language is a system of interaction in which meaning is derived from the face of the Other. The Other is the signifier, which manifests itself in language by the production of signs, which offer objective reality or thematize the world. But the Other itself cannot be thematized. The word that bears the Other as a theme contains the Other. The theming is a form of objectification: the Other is irreducible gold, definitely subject, infinitely other. Face, this absolutely other, is not a negation of the self. The presence of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79-81.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

the Other does not contradict the freedom of self. I can kill the other, but his face reminds me of my responsibility.¹⁰

1.3 Trace in the Face as Subjectivity

Subjectivity is a self that exists for the Other. It arises from the idea of infinity, and infinity is a product of the relationship of self to another.¹¹ The infinite is another other who meets me. In other words, the infinite is the starting point of morality, its foundation. This infinity is irreducible to knowledge.¹² However, Levinas admits that humans are not naturally moral, they must be awakened to ethics. Thus, Levinas makes ethics, respect for others, the first philosophy. Ethics is a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person.¹³ The other person, in a face to face encounter, is not another self with different qualities but essentially one like me.¹⁴ The Other arises in relation to others, intersubjectivity. This relation to others is the unique relation of ethical responsibility. The ethical relation of responsibility is prior to ontology.¹⁵

1.4 Subjectivity as Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity is the product of interiority. The interiority is a subjective approach in which a being refers to itself. Subjectivity allows itself to be considered as separate from the other; whereas externality is a state of being in which the self cannot be merged into a whole. Levinas states that the encounter with the Other cannot limit itself to the intimacy of love.¹⁶ It is because that this would exclude all people except one's intimate friends from attention and responsibility. The obligation is not attached to a particular feature of this other, but only to her/his entrance into one's world. Since I cannot, however, behave in any concrete way as everybody's servant, the situation makes it necessary for me to gather all others by means of a universal category which allows me to speak about them in general terms.¹⁷

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 300-301.

¹³ Sekar Sebastin, "Authentic Existence in Emmanuel Levinas," in: *Authentic Existence: A Philosophical Probe, Festschrift in Honour of Dr Johnson Puthenpurackal*, George Panthanmackel (Ed.), (Bangalore: ATC & ACPI, 2012), 332-334.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁵ John Lechte, *Fifty Great Contemporary Thinkers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 117.

¹⁶ Bettina Berge, "Emmanuel Levinas", [www. Plato. Stanford.edu](http://www.Plato.Stanford.edu), Accessed on September 14, 2021.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 299-301.

Fraternity evolving from the intersubjectivity means that the Other commands me to command but the superiority of the Other in this relationship consists in the other's face as the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan that forms a fraternal society.¹⁸ The relation with my neighbour is a relation of kinship outside all biology. My neighbour is 'precisely the Other.'

1.5 Intersubjectivity as Transcendence

The ethical encounter with the 'Other' requires that we consider them not primarily in their empirical, contingent existence but in the transcendental purity of their indeclinable ego. The externality and intersubjectivity is how the individual transcends finite into the infinite. It is a relationship in which the self is separate from the other. The externality is a relationship where the being of self and the being of other cannot be fused to infinity, because they are completely separated. "The same and the other cannot enter into a cognition that would encompass them...."¹⁹ Responsibility calls for a surrender to the Other that transcends the same.

1.6 Transcendence as Responsibility

For Levinas the feeling of responsibility for the other is not a rational choice but something that happens to you and that you experience as being chosen or 'elected' and that makes you unique, irreplaceable for the unique other. The ethical call is to surrender to the other, and to suffer from his suffering, an imperative that precedes all other consideration. Responsibility, as an order or command that I receive, does not originate with me. It precedes me. But not only does it precede me in the sense that it originates with someone before me (like my parents or a generation before me), it is pre-original. It refers to a past which is irrecoverable and pre-ontological/anarchaic. It stems from a time before my freedom, and before my beginning. It is an absolute past that has no subject. This means that for as long as one is one ought to be responsible for another that is infinite.²⁰

1.7 Responsibility as Infinity

The idea of the infinite is in itself a form of transcendence in relation to the Other, that saves me from solipsism and opens me to the externality. The other is absolutely other than oneself, infinitely transcendent reality. Levinas distinguishes between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity. The idea of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-277.

totality tries to integrate all the different and the same in all, while the idea of infinity maintains separation between the other and the same. According to Levinas, the idea of totality is all ontological, while the idea of infinity is ethical.²¹

Totality refers to the narcissism of the knowing 'I' and the obsession of possessing the other. Totality feels at home with itself, with sameness. It dislikes difference. The Western Philosophy, argues Levinas, under the influence of universalism, has practised a suppression of the Other. It rests on the inseparable bond between the One and Being, where unity alone is privileged. The Other, a new edition of myself, is perceived as a threat. In fact, the Other enjoys a sperate existence independent of me.²²

Infinity refers to radical alterity, as different from the same. It is totally separate from totality. The Other exceeds all grasping from the knowing self.²³ Whereas totality subordinates life to representation, infinity cannot be represented by thought. Fecundity is another example of alterity. Fecundity goes beyond biological fact. It speaks of the child who is similar and yet distinct and separate from the parents.²⁴

In sum, we can say, the term alterity derives from the Latin word "alter," which means "other." Ontology enacts a relationship with another being that reduces to the same. Instead, Levinas adopts an approach that does not reduce the other to the same. The other is absolutely Other than the Self. The Other is other than oneself. The Other is infinitely transcendent reality. Despite his insistence upon the absolute character of the transcendence of the Other, Levinas admits of a visitation of the Other in the 'face, that brings with it a trace of the infinity, in which the subjectivity is a self that exists for the Other. It arises from the idea of infinity, and infinity is a product of the relationship of self to another like me, who is fraternal. Fraternity evolving from the intersubjectivity means that the Other commands me to command. The externality and intersubjectivity is how the individual transcends finite into the infinite. Responsibility calls for a surrender to the Other that transcends the same. For Levinas, the feeling of responsibility for the other is not a rational choice but something that happens, calling for responsibility. Responsibility is to be despite my self to the other, and to suffer

21 *Ibid.*, 194-197.

22 *Ibid.*, 194-197.

23 Bettina Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas", [www. Plato. Stanford.edu](http://www.Plato.Stanford.edu), Accessed on September 14, 2021.

24 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 267-269.

from his suffering, an imperative that precedes all other consideration. This infinite responsibility is a form of transcendence in relation to the Other, that liberates itself from solipsism and opens the self to the exteriority. The other is an infinitely transcendent reality, and hence, one is to be responsible towards the Other infinitely. The pandemic teaches us of our responsibility towards the other as an ethical call without my choice, living for the alters (others) – egos are placed despite its being themselves at the service of alters – without making the alters living for me, without making the alters serve the egos.

2 *Egos at the Service of Alterity*²⁵

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the lockdown on March 24, 2020 at 08.00 p.m., just four hours before it was imposed all over the country, taking millions of migrant workers off guard. Unavoidable as it is, the nationwide lockdown has started to create serious problems for the commoners concerning the availability of food and other essentials at many parts of the country. Production has naturally run low ever since India put its 1.3 billion people under the shutdown, but on many occasions the failure of the supplying and distribution system has caused a situation in which the essentials are not reaching the masses. In order to help the poor people in this situation of crisis, for example, the Catholic Church, already on April 23, 2020, reached out to the poor affected by lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and were helping the affected people as best as they could. Among them was Montfort Brother Varghese Theckanath, Director of Montfort Social Institute in Hyderabad, India, who fed more than 500 scavengers in collaboration with government agencies and police officials. In the Northeast Province of Montfort Brothers, the Brothers took several initiatives across the different States including distribution of food materials, provision of masks and sanitary materials, contribution to the Chief Ministers' Relief Fund, and financial helps to the poor and needy in the neighborhoods of their institutions.

Christian Brother Steve Rocha of New Delhi's Columba's School now fed 4,000 vulnerable families of children associated with children's parliaments. Fr Anand Mathew and other priests of the Indian Missionary Society provided food and other essentials to 400 people stranded in railway and bus stations. They also fed more than 100 families daily. The Bangalore Province of the Salesians put the Don Bosco College in Kerala's Angadikkadavu at the disposal

25 For this section, See George Panthanmackel, "Zeal of the Consecrated Against COVID-19," in: *CRI Encyclopedia*, Vol. II (Bangalore: ATC & CRI, 2020), 1806-1839.

of the state government to keep the affected. They also made masks and prepared kits with rice, pulses to distribute to the poor in several places. Their counterparts in Hyderabad province produced masks for free distribution. They too distributed kits with essentials in different parts of Andhra and Telangana. In Meghalaya, sister nurses from different Congregations came together to care for the sick.

Fr Saji George Puthiyakulangara MSFS, Director of FAsCE India (FAsCE India of MSFS Guwahati Province under the leadership of the Provincial Fr Sabu Francis), Fr Anto Mappilakunnel MSFS and other MSFS Fathers in Northeast India already distributed food materials and other essential commodities to poor people in the villages. In the first phase, MSFS FAsCE India conducted community-based awareness in various villages: Chandrapur, Bongaon, Geetamandir, Hatisila, Ekrabari, Patharquarry, Satgaon, Amsing Jorabat in Assam and Somonpara in Meghalaya and made the people aware of the COVID -19, symptoms, its effect, precautionary measures, the importance of washing hands and wearing masks. More than 5000 people benefited from the first phase and FAsCE India also distributed 5000 masks. In the second phase, during the period of lockdowns, FAsCE India started the distribution of essential food items (rice, dal, potato, onion, salt, cooking oil) and soaps for handwashing for the people living in poor conditions, daily wagers, migrants, tea garden workers and slum dwellers.

In Guwahati, Sr Rose Hauniang Paite MSMHC adapted her tailoring school in response to the looming threat of coronavirus over surrounding slums. The school is normally run as a community development initiative, offering skills training to local women and children who are vulnerable to exploitation such as human trafficking. But now it was turned into a mask-making centre. Twenty-five women were stitching around 500 masks a day to be distributed throughout the slums of the region, where people lived very close together without access to drainage systems, running water or a fraction of the money needed for medical and sanitary supplies.

A distress call from a transgender at the Guwahati railway station on April 4, 2020, made Sr Prema Chowallur SCC to sit up. "I shed my fears of coronavirus and in faith set out to respond to the call, which touched me deep within," the member of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod said. The nun quickly plunged into action. The Society of Jesus (SJ) made enormous contribution in fighting coronavirus in manifold ways: Spreading awareness about prevention, hygiene, social distancing and isolation and combating stigma through the wide network of contacts; Jesuit East Asia (JEA) Secretary

has contacted all the Jesuit Schools and the Alumni all over India, making them aware of the possibilities of responding to Covid-19 and inspiring them to get actively involved in reaching out to those in need as suggested by the Government; Many Jesuit Schools have contacted the civil authorities and availed the facilities at their schools to the Government in their respective districts.

The Missionaries of Charity (MC), as always, were at the forefront in helping the poor and needy, despite being hard hit by the virus and the restrictions. In Kolkata itself – besides providing the daily cooked food and dry ration for approximately 1850 poor families in required quantities at the gates of the branch houses everywhere – reached out to all slums and villages in collaboration with Government Authorities who helped them with transport facilities for distribution of kits. On April 1, an Indian member of the Congregation in the United Kingdom died from COVID-19. Sister Sienna, a native of Jharkhand had been distributing food packets to those affected by the coronavirus outbreak. The septuagenarian died in Morriston Hospital in Swansea, Wales, where she was admitted with complications of the viral infection.

While many are aware of the astounding works done by the silent majority of the consecrated persons, these above-mentioned persons and Institutes were only a very few familiar and initial instances of massive works undertaken by them all over the country.

3. Alters at the Service of Egoity²⁶

As many moved with genuine love and compassion for others, egos moved to help the alters, there are also a number of reports that show many persons exploited the crisis for their selfish advantages, using alters (others) to serve egos. The following are only samples to evidence it.

For instance, according to a study published in *The Lancet* earlier this year, high-income economies with around 16% of the world's population have secured over 70% of doses of the five major coronavirus vaccines. Vaccine corruption is further fuelling vaccine inequity.

An analysis of data in the Philippines reveals that corruption has a strong negative correlation with immunization rates and vaccination delay in newborns. Likewise, a multicountry analysis from Africa reveals a link between corruption and delay in the introduction of new vaccines. In many countries,

26 For this section, See. fortune.com, Accessed on September 3, 2021.

politicians and high-ranking officials have abused their power to escape the vaccine queue. For instance, several Peruvian politicians received the doses months ahead of the national vaccine rollout. Some politicians offer vaccine bribes to lure people into voting for them. In Lebanon, political leaders have arranged vaccine drives for getting themselves elected. The Philippines President's security aides were inoculated with smuggled coronavirus vaccines.

There have been cases of vaccine theft by people in positions. In Indonesia, a prison doctor and three others were charged for stealing more than 1,000 vaccine doses meant for prison inmates. Earlier this year, Kaspersky reported Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines being sold with prices ranging from \$250 to \$1,200 per dose. Mexican police in April uncovered a clinic that gave people doses containing distilled water for \$1,000 each. These corrupt practices can be crippling the global health effort, violating WHO protocols to make vaccines available to those who need them most first. It also undermines confidence in public institutions, and may translate into vaccine hesitancy and a decrease in vaccination coverage.

There has been a similar inequity with regard to access to Covid-19 testing.²⁷ Wealthy individuals and companies are able to line up private testing services and get results within hours, as the New York Times documented, while much of the rest of the country must wait in line for hours for free testing that takes much longer to produce results. Professional and college sports also resumed this year because they had the wealth and clout to contract with private labs to carry out robust testing schedules. A recent Washington Post story lays out the stark disparity: The National Football League (NFL) administers tens of thousands of tests to players, coaches, and employees each week. The Major League Baseball conducted 170,000 tests during its shortened season, and major college football programmes conduct dozens of tests each day. But Jane Sandoval, a 58-year-old emergency room nurse in California, had not been tested once in eight months.

There is also a racial aspect to the testing disparity. ABC News found "fewer testing sites in areas primarily inhabited by racial minorities" and that "Black and Hispanic people are more likely to experience longer wait times and understaffed testing centres." Experts told STAT News that it's likely vaccine distribution will be corrupted by the wheeling and dealing of the wealthy and well-connected. This could lead to undesirable consequences. In Kolkata, Debanjan Deb, who conducted dubious vaccine camps in June

27 For this section, Cf. www.pogo.org, Accessed on September 3, 2021.

2021, impersonating as Joint Commissioner of the Municipal Corporation, is suspected to have vaccinated at least 1,500 people in these camps.²⁸

Conclusion

Covid-19, the coronavirus pandemic, has affected every aspect of our life. This has affected millions of peoples, who are either sick or are being killed due to the spread of this disease. It has far-reaching consequences on healthcare, economic and social situation. The people's response to the pandemic has largely been either 'egoitic' (self-centred) or 'alteritic (other-centred).' Before we turned our attention to some of the instances of egoitic and alteritic responses, we have reflected on the meaning of alterity in Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy popularized the concept, 'alterity.' Alterity is the insistence that the Other always remains irreducible to representation. Despite his insistence upon the absolute character of the transcendence of the Other, Levinas admits of an 'epiphany' or proximity' of the Other in the 'face. The alterity is the radical heterogeneity of the other. The face brings with it a trace of the infinity which we cannot know directly and fully. The other person is irreducible to my experience of him/her, and so never present or co-present with me. Ontology enacts a relationship with another being that reduces to the same. Instead, Levinas adopts an approach that does not reduce the other to the same, but considers the separation between himself and the other as inherent in the relationship with Being. The Other is absolutely Other than the Self. The Other is infinitely transcendent reality. The idea of infinity requires the separation of the Same and the Other. The idea of totality tries to integrate all the different and the same in all, while the idea of infinity maintains separation between the other and the same. The idea of totality is ontological, while the idea of infinity is ethical. The alterity of the other person, which awakes the principle of transcendence in the ontological subject, is described as the face. The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity. A face is the presentation of an entity. Responsibility, as an order or command that I receive, does not originate with me. It precedes me. It commands me to help the poor and needy. In order to help the poor people in this situation of crisis caused by the pandemic, for example, the Catholic Church in India, already on April 23, 2020, reached out to the poor affected by lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and was helping the affected people as best as she could. As many moved with genuine love and compassion for others, egos moved to serve the

28 Monalisa Chaudhuri, "Fake IAS Held for Covid Vaccine Scam," in: *The Telegraph*, Metro Page (Kolkata: June 24, 2021), 1.

alters, there are also many persons who exploited the crisis for their selfish advantage, using alters (others) to serve egos. For instance, according to an analysis published in *The Lancet* earlier this year, high-income economies with around 16% of the world's population have secured over 70% of doses of the five major coronavirus vaccines for 2021.

Denying Covid Vaccine and Climate Change: Lessons for Our Survival and Flourishing

Kuruville Pandikattu, SJ

Abstract:

The case studies of those who deny Covid-19 and the vaccine, in spite of 4.92 million documented death, call for a special study. This article documents some well-known persons who deny Covid-19 as well as its vaccine. Then, we relate them to climate change (global warming) deniers and those who ignore the human-induced Anthropocene and Sixth Mass Extinction. Both of them seem to have similar psychological and philosophical inclinations. Further, we look into some of the philosophical and psychological reasons that can help us understand their need to deny these terrific realities of life. Finally, we plead to recognise the reality around us (including scientific data and religious experiences), so that together we can enable a sustainable world order.

Keywords: Covid Vaccine, Covid deniers, Global Warming, Sixth Mass Extinction, Human Sustainability.

Introduction

An American Senator, Ted Cruz, was roundly chastised after ridiculing Australia's new Covid-19 vaccination rules for workers.¹ Cruz tweeted against Covid-19 rates and fines for those who have not been vaccinated in Australia. "The Covid dictatorship of their current regime is terrible and tragic," he continued. Individual liberty is important. Cruz's statement drew a lot of attention online, including a scathing retort from Australian politician Michael Gunner underlining the necessity of immunisations in protecting the weak, and he closed with a mic drop condemning Cruz's ignorance of the Covid-19 vaccine. Meanwhile, God commanded a

1 A. Quamer, *Ted Cruz mocked Australia's vaccine mandate, so a local politician responded with fire*. Daily Kos. <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2021/-10/18/2058816/--We-don-t-need-your-lectures-thanks-mate-Australian-politician-roasts-Ted-Cruz>, Accessed on 19, October 2021.

pastor in a deep-red Kentucky area to safeguard his flock by getting them vaccinated.² Local health organisations have attempted to “enroll churches in the all-hands-on-deck immunisation push” in distant rural hamlets where pastors are trusted counsellors. Pastor Billy Joe Lewis of Smilax, was one of the radical traditionalist clergymen who consented to help with the immunisation attempt. He believes in appealing to God to rid the country of the coronavirus’s plague. But, unlike the anti-vaxxers, who enlist the help of ‘prayer warriors’ after being hospitalised with Covid, Lewis strives to dispel vaccination myths in a language his congregation understands and urge them to get vaccinated.³

This article attempts to understand the mind of anti-vaxxers and climate deniers first look at two sets of tragic case studies, where misinformed people, who denied vaccine, have caused tremendous damage to the public. Then we look at their similarities to climate deniers and further explore some philosophical bases for such an attitude. In the concluding section, we glance through humanity’s more serious problems (like mass extinction) and plead for an openness to science and truth. We hold that they may not give us absolute truths but take us closer to the truths that will sustain us!

1 Case Studies One: Three Doctors Who Deny Vaccine

Medical doctors take an oath to do no harm, but some of these doctors are spreading misinformation about the Covid vaccine.⁴ In this section, we take three such cases.

1.1 Dr. Christiane Northrup

Northrup utilises her Facebook page to bring fans to Telegram, where she reveals a different side of herself. Misinformation and conspiracy theories abound on this platform, which has minimal control.⁵ One of the posts she shared says, “Best Explanation I’ve Seen About Why the Covid Jabs

2 C. Jay, *Pastor in deep-red KY county says God told him to protect his flock by getting them vaccinated*. Daily Kos. <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2021/10/18/2058673/-Pastor-in-deep-red-KY-county-says-God-told-him-to-protect-his-flock-by-getting-them-vaccinated>, Accessed on 19, October 2021.

3 *Ibid.*

4 R. Kuznia, S. Bronstein, C. Devine & D. Griffin, *Covid vaccine misinformation: These doctors are part of the problem—CNN*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/19/us/doctors-covid-vaccine-misinformation-invs/index.html>, Accessed on 20, October 2021.

5 Olivia Willis, "Know Someone Feeling Concerned about the COVID Jab? Here's What to Say." *ABC News*, www.abc.net.au, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2021-03-29/coronavirus-vaccines-concernes-conversation-guide/100018588>, Accessed on 28, March 2021.

Are Killer Shots [vaccines].” She added: “Me realising I don’t have to take revenge on my adversaries because they’ve all got the jab,” she wrote in late August in a meme. Northrup states, “Another hero emerges,” referring to a doctor who refused to see vaccinated patients. Northrup is one of a tiny handful of doctors who have become a major source of misinformation regarding Covid-19 vaccinations, which have shown to be the most effective weapon against the greatest pandemic in 100 years, whether as social media influencers or family doctors consulting with patients in person.⁶ The doctors are stoking the flames at a time when the number of Covid-19 deaths in the United States has topped 724,000, and the victims are mostly the unvaccinated. They do so, for the most part, with no repercussions.⁷ The Federation of State Medical Boards’ board of directors stated in late July warning physicians about the dangers of spreading incorrect information regarding Covid-19 vaccinations might jeopardise their medical licenses. And high-profile doctors who disseminate false information to millions of people have escaped regulatory scrutiny.

1.2 Dr. Rashid Buttar

Buttar has made a slew of outlandish assertions and misstatements regarding the pandemic, including the claim that by 2025, the majority of those who received the vaccine will have died. All of this is part of a “depopulation strategy.” He described Covid-19 as a “planned operation” on Twitter and defended everything saying that Covid is the finest thing that could happen to develop your own innate immune system.” More people are dying from the Covid vaccine than from Covid,” he later claimed incorrectly. Northrup and Buttar are seeding doubt about the Covid-19 immunisations at a time when nearly a third of eligible Americans are still unvaccinated, a big portion of whom are Trump Republicans. The “Disinformation Dozen” report caused President Joe Biden to admonish social media influencers for disseminating information that is “killing lives.” Buttar, who has mocked his inclusion on the “disinformation dozen,” claims that the vaccination is part of an elite scheme to inflict mass extermination of common people. He compares Dr. Anthony Fauci, US President’s adviser and head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to Adolf Hitler, claiming that Fauci’s death toll will exceed that of the Holocaust.

6 R. Kuznia, S. Bronstein, C. Devine & D. Griffin, *Covid vaccine misinformation: These doctors are part of the problem*—CNN. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/19/us/doctors-covid-vaccine-misinformation-invs/index.html>, Accessed on 20, October 2021.

7 *Ibid.*

1.3 Dr. Annie Bukacek

Dr. Annie Bukacek, a Montana doctor claims Covid threat ‘exaggerated’.⁸ But while celebrity doctors are broadcasting bunk vaccine information to mass audiences on social media, other physicians are spreading misinformation at the local level the old-fashioned way: face-to-face. Across the country, complaints to state medical boards about doctors misinforming patients about Covid-19 are on the rise, said Dr. Humayun Chaudhry. He told CNN that at least a dozen directors of state medical boards have told him that they’re receiving “a lot” of complaints about physicians sharing coronavirus misinformation. But few have led to disciplinary action, he acknowledged.” The system has been set up as a complaint-based system,” Chaudhry said. “These state boards simply do not have the resources ... to monitor what’s happening on the internet or what’s going on even in an individual patient encounter.”⁹

Annie Bukacek believes the response to the pandemic has been an orchestrated attempt by elites to control the masses. Bukacek on Facebook posted, “Imagine a vaccine so safe you have to be threatened to take it -- for a disease so deadly you have to be tested to know you have it!” “So you can have a vaccinated man, sleep with an unvaccinated woman... and she will become INFERTILE,” said a February post by Bukacek on Facebook, which flagged the claim as false.” If Covid is so dangerous, we’d be seeing people die left and right,” Bukacek said at a school board meeting. When CNN approached Bukacek and asked why she - a doctor - was anti-vaccine, she bristled.” I’m not anti-vaccine,” Bukacek said. Dr. Peter Heyboer, a primary care physician, said “Physicians who use their authority in their position as a trusted adviser to spread misinformation ... they share part of the responsibility for the level of illness and death we are experiencing.” “She states that Covid-19 death certificates are manipulated, she discredits PCR testing, and by the nature of her medical profession and health board status is leading naïve members of the community in promoting and participating in anti-masking propaganda that is endangering our citizens,” states the complaint, which CNN has obtained.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

2 Case Studies Two: People Who Died of Covid

2.1 What I Truly Hoped for

‘What I hoped for the entire time,’ said the conservative radio personality, who hugged strangers all the time in order to catch covid.¹⁰ Right-wing radio commentator Dennis Prager remarked early in the outbreak that he didn’t mind dining with cutlery that had fallen to the ground. Now, after the virus has killed over 700,000 people in the United States, Prager has admitted that he’s been aiming to develop a coronavirus infection for quite some time.¹¹ The 73-year-old host of “The Dennis Prager Show” tested positive for the coronavirus.” I’ve interacted with strangers, hugged them and taken selfies with them despite the fact that I was putting myself in danger of becoming covid,” he stated. “Which is exactly what I wanted, as strange as that seemed, in the hopes of achieving natural immunity and having treatments take care of the rest.”

Contrary to CDC findings and guidelines, Prager informed his audience that natural immunity was more successful than vaccination, and that a covid infection was “what I hoped for the entire time.” The CDC advises people to get vaccinated even if they have already been infected with the virus, citing a study published in August that found unvaccinated people who had already been infected with covid were twice as likely to be reinfected as those who had been fully vaccinated after contracting the virus. Prager named a cocktail of medications he said he’d been taking during the pandemic, many of which haven’t been approved by the FDA. He has also gotten monoclonal antibodies, an FDA-approved treatment, since catching the virus, he said. Since his diagnosis, the host has been “steadily improving,” according to him. Prager has not presented his daily talk program for some days but maintained that “at no point was I in risk of hospitalisation” while broadcasting from his home. Sadly, Prager is one of a number of conservative radio show hosts who have promoted false information regarding the coronavirus and immunisations, including those who have died due to the virus. Further, at least five right-wing radio show hosts have died of Covid-19 in the last three months, all of whom discouraged their listeners from getting the vaccine.

10 J. Mark, *Conservative radio host said he constantly hugged strangers to catch covid: 'What I hoped for the entire time'*. Chron. <https://www.chron.com/news/article/Conservative-radio-host-said-he-constantly-hugged-16544750.php>, Accessed on 19 October, 2021.

11 *Ibid.*

2.2 Anti-vaxxers Who Died of Covid-19

Anti-vaxxers say they're 'free-thinkers', 'anti-Big Pharma, Big Media, anti-WHO/CDC'.¹² Some of them had to pay with their lives for their belief. A four year old Texas girl died in her sleep after contracting Covid-19, likely off her vehemently anti-vax mother, Karra Harwood. "I was one of the people that was anti, I was against it," the mother was quoted as saying. "Now, I wish I never was."¹³ Stressing freedom, vaccine opponents rebranding in virus era. "All you can do is try to fight for your freedom," Garcia said. "We are for medical freedom, bodily autonomy. Our bodies are ours, not for someone else to govern."¹⁴ We must admit that all the anti-vaxxers are not crazy.¹⁵

3 Climate Deniers

The recent climate-related catastrophes should be enough to end lingering doubt that our planet is heating and, in turn, wreaking havoc as a result of our continued spewing of green house gases. Scientists have warned of these horrendous outcomes. But, like the doubters of the Covid-19 vaccine's safety and efficacy, climate change deniers, many of whom are elected to leadership positions in this country, ignore facts and science as proof stares them in the face. Hearing the regrets of many unvaccinated hospitalised Covid-19 patients — now gasping for breath — makes for an ominous analogy. Will climate change deniers come around before civilisation takes its last gasp in a man-made hostile environment? Vaccine mandates may be coming, and so should stiffer mandates to end fossil fuel burning and causing climate crisis.

3.1 99.9% of Scientists Agree that Climate Crisis Is Caused by Humans

The headline of a recent article says: 'Case closed': 99.9% of scientists agree climate emergency caused by humans.¹⁶ A review of 90,000 studies reveals

12 J. Hilotin, *Celebrity anti-vaxxers who died of COVID-19*. <https://gulfnews.com/photos/news/celebrity-anti-vaxxers-who-died-of-covid-19-1.1632401033596>, Accessed on 25, September 2021.

13 *Ibid.*

14 B. Dupuy, Stressing freedom, vaccine opponents rebranding in virus era. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-pandemics-public-health-us-news-30998a2aca26af17fe14f8da939ec0f4>, Accessed on 22, October 2020.

15 B. L. Hausman, *Antivax: reframing the vaccination controversy* (Cornell:ILR Press an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2019).

16 J Watts, "Case closed': 99.9% of scientists agree climate emergency caused by humans," in *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/19/case-closed-999-of-scientists-agree-climate-emergency-caused-by-humans>, Accessed on 19, October 2021.

agreement, prompting calls for Facebook and Twitter to take more to combat misinformation. According to new data, the scientific consensus that people are influencing the climate has passed 99.9%, bolstering the argument for global action at the Cop26 meeting held from October 31 to November 13 2021, in Glasgow, Scotland. Based on a survey of roughly 90,000 climate-related research, the authors claim that scientific certainty about the influence of greenhouse gases is now comparable to that of evolution and plate tectonics. This means that specialists are almost unanimous in their belief that burning fossil fuels like oil, gas, coal, peat, and forests heats the earth and causes more extreme weather. According to a previous poll conducted in 2013, 97 percent of studies published between 1991 and 2012 supported the notion that human actions are modifying the Earth's climate.

The study by Cornell University has updated and enlarged on this, showing that the minuscule percentage of skeptics has practically vanished as evidence of the relationship between fossil-fuel burning and climate disruption grows.¹⁷ The most recent survey of peer-reviewed literature published between 2012 and November 2020 was split into two. First, the researchers looked at a random sample of 3,000 studies, finding only four papers that questioned whether people were to blame for the climate problem. Second, they looked through the entire database of 88,125 studies for keywords related to climate skepticism, such as "natural cycles" and "cosmic rays," and found 28 papers, all of which were published in tiny journals. The authors said that their study, which was published in the journal *Environmental Research Letters*, indicated that skepticism among specialists has decreased dramatically." The case is effectively concluded. There is no one in the scientific community who questions human-caused climate change," said Mark Lynas, a visiting fellow at Cornell University and the study's primary author.¹⁸ This echoed the world's highest scientific agency, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which stated that "human activity has unmistakably warmed the atmosphere, oceans, and land."

The general public is unaware of how particular professionals think, and this lack of understanding is mirrored in political debate. This is notably true in the United States, where fossil fuel companies have supported a disinformation effort falsely implying that the science is still being debated, akin to the tobacco industry's attempt to cast doubt on the link between smoking and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

cancer. According to the paper, only 27% of US citizens believe “nearly all” experts agree that climate catastrophe is caused by human activities, according to a Pew Research Center study from 2016. Since at least George W. Bush’s presidency, many senior Republicans have continued to cast doubt on the link between human activity and the climate catastrophe, as market analysts have encouraged them to do. Thirty United States senators and 109 representatives, according to the Center for American Progress, “refuse to acknowledge the scientific evidence of human-caused climate change.” Several major news organisations and social media platforms also propagate climate-skeptical viewpoints that are unsupported by science.

According to Lynas, the report should prompt them to reconsider their policy. “This puts social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter in a bind. It’s related to vaccination misinformation in that both lack a scientific foundation and have a negative influence on society. Regulators should require social networks that allow climate misinformation to flourish to examine their algorithms and policies.” Some observers have questioned the importance of a scientific consensus, claiming that it serves as a diversion from more urgent issues. They do, however, believe it is critical for media outlets to avoid creating a false sense of balance by giving equal weight and publicity to pro and con views. Most importantly, for a coordinated international response to the climate issue, a consensus is viewed as critical.¹⁹

3.2 Fighting Anti-vaxxers and Climate Change Doubters Often Backfires

Scientists debate how to engage in the “war on science”²⁰ caused by these antivaxxers and climate deniers.²¹ They feel that it is not just one war if there’s a war on science. People who disagree with you on issues like immunisations, climate change, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs) may be unknowingly feeding the fight. These were some of the points presented during a session at the AAAS annual meeting (which publishes science). The speakers were a philosopher, a medical historian, a plant scientist, and a technological historian. Their discussions demonstrated that parents who are

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ J Cohen, *Why fighting anti-vaxxers and climate change doubters often backfires*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/why-fighting-anti-vaxxers-and-climate-change-doubters-often-backfires>, Accessed on 13, February, 2016.

²¹ Champagne C. Denis J. L. & D. M Weinstock, *Investigating why dissemination of scientific evidence fails to persuade antivaxxers: a transdisciplinary review* (dissertation), (Montréal: Université de Montréal, 2021).

concerned about vaccinations for their children are not necessarily opposed to climate change or GMOs. “In each of these three domains, there are a number of distinct reasons underlying the resistance,” said Roberta Millstein, a philosopher at the University of California, Davis. “There isn’t a coordinated attack going on here.” She claims that while the two sides in each dispute may agree on the facts and probable risks, they disagree on the significance of those concerns.²²

Mark Largent, a medical historian at Michigan State University in East Lansing, advised vaccination proponents to cease characterising parents who refuse to immunise their children as anti-science and uninformed. “Quite the opposite,” adds Largent. “They have a high level of trust in science and clinicians and a broad understanding of vaccines.” He claims that they are deeply concerned about the pharmaceutical business, the insurance system, and government laws, all of which he believes are not in their children’s best interests. According to Largent, studies reveal that 40 percent of parents in the United States have “extreme anxiety” about vaccinating their children, yet just 3% are anti-vaccine. His views are based on surveys he and colleagues are doing of Michigan parents who, as of December 2014, are obliged to attend a 30-minute vaccination education class if they want to request a waiver for a child’s mandatory immunisation. Waiver requests have decreased by 39% since the program began. “It’s a massive figure,” Largent says. However, almost all of these individuals never come in for the vaccination education and instead choose to have their children vaccinated. In other words, they have misgivings about vaccines and the number of carefully administered childhood vaccinations (35 % presently, up from eight in the 1980s), but they are not anti-vaccine.²³ The vaccine education workshops do absolutely nothing to influence their opinions,” he added of those who do come in. Education “doesn’t work,” he added, though it may have an influence in the long run, which Michigan registries should be able to track as these youngsters get older. The most crucial method to engage these anti-vaccination parents, according to Largent, is to “decouple” vaccine promotion from the pharmaceutical firms that these parents distrust. He stated, “I don’t want Merck talking about the usefulness of vaccines.” “Just be quiet,” she said.

22 J Cohen, *Why fighting anti-vaxxers and climate change doubters often backfires*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/why-fighting-anti-vaxxers-and-climate-change-doubters-often-backfires>.

23 Paul Offit, *Bad advice or why celebrities politicians and activists aren't your best source of health information* (US: Columbia UP, 2018), Accessed on 13, February 2016.

Two presenters pointed out that opponents of GMOs and climate change often misrepresent data. Erik Conway, co-author of *Merchants of Doubt: How a Few Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues From Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*,²⁴ pointed out that there's even a term for fabricating false knowledge—"agnogenesis"—which he didn't develop. Conway and scientific historian Naomi Oreskes argue in the book that skeptics of climate change generated a "Potemkin village" effect by "replacing science with its antithesis" out of fear that environmental restrictions would hinder the free market and destroy vital economic interests. "To corrupt our knowledge of the world," he stated of the Potemkin village builders.²⁵

Paying more attention to the concerns of the opponents, according to both historian Largent and philosopher Millstein, is one method to help calm the waters in each of these conflicts. The cartoonish images of people who disagree with the scientific "us"—"They're just wrong, and we're fine"—are "lazy," according to Largent, because they don't force us to accomplish anything. "You need to get away from this belligerent anti-science mindset, away from 'I'm a poor and battled scientist,' 'I'm a poor and battled physician,' because you aren't. You're a part of Western civilisation's most powerful enterprise. You are the one in charge."²⁶ When someone is lost in the woods and approaches you for assistance, he says the first thing you should do is ask them where they are. Millstein went on to say, "Stop calling it a science war between us and them." "It's a waste of time," Millstein argues. "We're making it appear as if they don't care about science, and instead of attempting to engage them in the dialogue, we're driving them into another camp."²⁷

3.3 Anti-vaxxers as the New Climate Deniers

An alarming one in three Americans said they won't get the Covid-19 vaccine, according to a new AP-NORC poll. And since 70–80% of Americans must get the vaccine to establish herd immunity, the effort to suppress the virus by vaccine may already be doomed.²⁸ Most people cite safety and effectiveness

24 Conway E. M. & Oreskes N, *Merchants of Doubt* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

25 J Cohen, *Why fighting anti-vaxxers and climate change doubters often backfires*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/why-fighting-anti-vaxxers-and-climate-change-doubters-often-backfires>, Accessed on 13, February 2016.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 Pytel B, Anti-vaxxers are the new climate deniers. *Planet Days*. <https://medium.com/planet-days/anti-vaxxers-are-the-new-climate-deniers-381333271e37>, Accessed on 28, February 2021.

of the vaccine as the roots of their skepticism. They also cite distrust of the government and the speed with which these vaccines were created. And then there are the conspiracy theorists.²⁹ We won't dive into each of these concerns, because plenty of websites already do that. Instead, we want to explore how the roots of this skepticism is similar to another, equally dangerous trend: climate denial. The sources of distrust are often unwieldy, multifaceted, and hard to pin down. Humans are complicated and so are the problems they face. But there are still several common denominators. For example, in both the climate crisis and our current health crisis, much of the distrust is rooted in misinformation, divorced from scientific facts and consensus.

An overwhelming majority of scientists believe in human-caused climate change, and a similar majority believe that vaccines are safe. Yet, in both cases, a significant number of people are on the fence — over a third of Americans still do not attribute climate change to humans. This disconnect between science and the public is a product of several factors, but it's mostly related to how we consume media. Social media platforms like Facebook have allowed misinformation to rage through their networks like a California wildfire. Earlier, Facebook said it would crack down on anti-vaccination misinformation, but many experts worry that it's too late. Much like the tide of climate change misinformation, which Facebook also failed to stem, the roots of skepticism have already taken hold of millions of Americans. The same systems that allow misinformation to flourish also give huge platforms to a few individuals. Donald Trump used Twitter to minimise the threats of climate change and Covid-19. Online salesman Joseph Mercola has made millions selling natural healthcare products, labeled as alternatives to vaccines that fly in the face of general scientific consensus.

Television and radio are not off the hook here either. For 30 years, the late radio host Rush Limbaugh spoke directly to 15 million listeners, leaving behind a legacy of climate denial and misinformation. Other conservative media giants, notably those who have shows on Fox News, have fueled similar climate denial for years, which has seeped into the Republican Party. The digression to anti-vaccination, therefore, seemed inevitable. Recently, Sean Hannity used his Fox News show to cast doubt about the safety of Covid-19 vaccines. It's no wonder then that Republicans are also the group that is least likely to take the Covid-19 vaccine. The bad news is that much of climate denial has already screwed the Planet, sowing enough doubt to impede progress and lock the Earth into inevitable warming. But it's not too late to communicate the

29 *Ibid.*

safety and necessity of vaccines. As the climate crisis has shown, it's better to be proactive than reactive. So far, the Biden administration has largely failed to convince people to take the Covid-19 vaccine. To change that, the Biden Administration, with the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative, recently launched a new action alliance, an effort that includes an unheard of \$50 million public education campaign.

The president can also use his platform to defend science, rather than attack it, by delivering simple, clear calls-to-action, perhaps from the Oval Office, or better yet, from a diverse group of celebrities, executives, and influencers, as *The New York Times* suggests.³⁰ We've failed to curb the climate crisis, largely because of increasing misinformation and skepticism in the face of established science. Should we fail to reach herd immunity because of that same distrust, we're setting ourselves up for a dangerous future.

4 Philosophical Bases

Given this context of the denial of science and what it provides us, we need to search for the reasons. Why are many people afraid of taking the vaccines? Why do many find it convenient to deny that almost unanimous fact of climate crisis?

4.1 Medium as the Message

One of the reasons is the modern claim, popularised by the well-known media expert,³¹ that in our contemporary society the media itself has become the message. Though he did not intend it and though he had some valid insights, this Canadian scholar could never have imagined that it will lead to the proliferation of the fake news. Some of his later interpreters have twisted this message of the visionary communication theorist that communication and visibility alone matter and not the content. They tend to deny any truth-value to the claims that the media make. Thus, anyone loud enough can make news. Anyone strong enough to convince others can provide a message, irrespective of its truth-value. This, coupled with the spread of social network, has led people to choose what they want to believe in, giving up any semblance of objectivity and truthfulness. According to them what matters are the many mini-narratives, none of which can have claim to absolute truths. In such an ambience, every mini-narrative can make its own truth!

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ McLuhan M. & McLuhan E, *The Lost Tetrads of Marshall McLuhan* (New York: OR Books, 2017).

4.2 Only Interpretation, No Facts

Further, there is the claim of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom “All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.” Further, he adds that, “there are no facts, only interpretations.” Though Nietzsche has some valid insights to contribute, his postmodern way of thinking does away with every facts, reducing everything to interpretations. Thus, absolutizing interpretation makes every statement valid and “true” in their own fields. Thus the climate deniers and anti-vaxxers can comfortably live in their own worlds, without recourse to any “absolute truths.”

4.3 Deconstructing Everyone and Everything

Further, Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that there are no self-sufficient units of meaning in a text, because individual words, or sentences in a text can only be properly understood in terms of how they fit into the larger structure of the text and language itself. So, we can find the meaning of a text through a very thorough examination of the language and logic of philosophical. Hence, Derrida introduced term deconstruction. Deconstruction doesn't actually mean “demolition” or “destruction.” Instead it means “breaking down” or analysing something (especially the words in a work of fiction or nonfiction) to discover its true significance, which is supposedly almost never exactly what the author intended. Further, Derrida argues that in Western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary oppositions (white/black, masculine/feminine, cause / effect, conscious/unconscious, presence absence, speech/writing).

Going further, if everything and everyone needs to be deconstructed, then, we are not sure of the author's meanings, nor are we sure of the deconstructed meaning of one reader as opposed to another. In such a world of varied deconstructed world of meanings, “everything goes,” as the postmodernists are fond of saying. As such we are not finding fault with these great pioneering thinkers – McLuhan, Nietzsche and Derrida–, on their contribution. But we are asserting that their valid contributions have been misused to cultivate a skeptical and nihilistic attitude to science, which is definitely detrimental to humanity. Further, we are not claiming that these are the only reasons for denial of vaccines and climate denials. There are definitely more complex and subtle reasons (like the disgust with abuse of power, authority and institutions, revolt against the rampant inequality in wealth, misuse of pharmaceutical companies to make profit, even at the cost of the covid victims, etc.), which are beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Conclusion: Sustaining Our Common Future

5.1 Saving Science as Search for Truth, Not Finding It

“I hope you die,” wished one protester to the nurses and doctors who were treating patients. Dozens of researchers tell *Nature* they have received death threats, or threats of physical or sexual violence.³² Krutika Kuppalli, an infectious-diseases physician, had only been in her work when she received a phone call at home in September 2020, threatening to kill her. Kuppalli, who had recently moved from California to Charleston to teach at the Medical University of South Carolina, had been dealing with online abuse for months after giving high-profile media interviews about Covid-19. She had also testified to a US congressional committee on how to hold safe elections during the pandemic. The phone call, on the other hand, was a terrifying escalation. Kuppalli, who now works at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, Switzerland, says, “It made me really uneasy, nervous, and upset.” She phoned the cops, but she didn’t hear if they did anything. The menacing e-mails, phone calls, and remarks on the internet continued. A police officer visited Kuppalli after a second death threat call, who advised her to buy a gun. Strange way of self-defence!

Kuppalli’s experience during the epidemic was far from unusual. A study by Nature of over 300 scientists who had given media interviews about Covid-19 — many of whom had also commented on the epidemic on social media — showed widespread harassment or abuse, with 15% reporting death threats (see “Negative impacts”). Harassment in high-profile situations has been well-documented. After receiving death threats, Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in the United States, was assigned personal security guards; UK chief medical adviser Chris Whitty was grabbed and shoved in the street; and German virologist Christian Drosten received a parcel containing a vial of liquid labeled ‘positive’ and a note instructing him to drink it. When a military shooter went on the run after leaving a note stating his intentions to target virologists, Belgian virologist Marc Van Ranst and his family were placed in a safer house.³³

These are extreme cases. However, more than two-thirds of researchers in Nature’s study said they had had negative experiences as a result of their media appearances or social media comments, and 22% said they had received

32 Nogrady B, “I hope you die: How the COVID pandemic unleashed attacks on scientist, in *Nature*, 598 (7880), (2021), 250–253. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-02741-x>.

33 *Ibid*.

threats of physical or sexual harm. Some scientists said that their workplace had received complaints about them, or that their home address had been leaked on the internet. Six scientists have stated that they have been physically assaulted (see Supplementary information for survey data tables). Climate change, vaccination, and the impacts of gun violence have all been targets of coordinated social media campaigns and threatening e-mails or phone calls to scientists in the past. Even high-profile scientists before Covid-19 warned *Nature* that the misuse was a new and unwanted occurrence linked to the pandemic. Many people wanted the scope of the issue to be explored more openly. One researcher commented in their survey response, “I believe national governments, funding agencies, and scientific organisations have not done enough to publicly protect scientists.”

Some researchers claim they’ve learned to deal with the harassment and embrace it as an unavoidable but necessary side consequence of disseminating information to the general public. And, even if they were hounded thereafter, 85 percent of survey respondents said their interactions with the media were usually or mainly favorable. “I believe scientists should be trained in how to interact with the media as well as what to expect from trolls - it’s all part of internet communication,” one wrote. However, *Nature*’s poll reveals that, despite researchers’ best efforts to ignore criticism, it has already had a chilling effect on scientific communication. Scientists who experienced more trolling or personal assaults were also more likely to state that their experiences had a significant impact on their willingness to speak to the media in the future.³⁴

5.2 Undermining Our Common Future

Along with a growing mistrust of what has become known as MSM (mainstream media) in the new millennium, there has been an erosion in respect for the political process and a backlash against the corporate world, particularly multinational corporations.³⁵ For decades, concerns about the environment and global warming have been portrayed either as a left-leaning or youth-oriented issue by conservative governments, big business and sections of the media. At the same time, climate and the environment were reshaped and transformed from a scientific debate into a battle over political ideology. In the process, science and scientists have been demonised and ridiculed,

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Verrender I, Will vaccine hesitancy undermine our future? *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-13/covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-climate-change-australia-anti-vaxxers/100455944>, Accessed on 12, September 2021.

often by those who know little if anything about the scientific process, just for doing their job. That's been elevated by the extended lockdowns, which have damaged — in some cases permanently — the livelihoods and businesses of large sections of the population; damage that flows on into personal lives, relationships and mental health. It is not an environment conducive to rational thought and argument.³⁶ But that is not enough reason to give up reason altogether and abandon science completely.

5.3 Our Limited Knowledge and Ongoing Search for Truth

We do need to admit that the knowledge science provides is limited, tentative and, always in need of revising. That does not make it wrong. That makes it open to better interpretations brings us closer to the truth. The very science that has brought about the tremendous communication technology is also warning us of the dangers of mass extinction. Science may revise its opinion. But, if communication technology can be accepted by vaccine deniers and climate deniersthen, we need to remember that the same scientific method is warning us of the impending Sixth Mass Extinction caused by humans. We cannot afford to remain in denial and encapsulate ourselves in our comfort zones. So, we need a committed, compassionate and collective approach to explore the scope and method of science and its claim for truth. Further, we need to emphasise that philosophy is trying to provide us with wisdom to cope with the challenges brought about by our own scientific and technological progress.

In all humility, we need to accept that the truth that we aim at still remains onthe horizon.³⁷ We do not arrive at it, but we are moving towards it with the help of sciences, religions and other sources of human knowledge. So the truth we aim at is “ever approachable, never attainable”³⁸ Thus, accepting our truths, limited and tentative, with a sense of humility, can, definitely, lead us to human survival and flourishing.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Job Kozhamthadam, “Modern Science in India and the Emergence of a Wholesome and Flourishing Worldview,” *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, Jan-Dec 2015 (Vol 19/1-2), 154–180. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4431172>.

³⁸ Kuruvila Pandikatt, *Ever approachable never attainable: Science-religion dialogue in India* (Pune: Jnanam & Creative Ventures, 2015).

Covid-19 Experience and Media

Francis Arackal Thummy, OP

Abstract:

Covid-19 struck almost the entire humanity with so many theories floating around regarding its origin and causes, without any definite information about the same. It's the media which brought to global attention the lightning-like speed and spread of the virus. In this article we look at the positive and negative influence of the media in reporting various aspects of the Covid pandemic – how the media responded in alleviating the miseries of the people by providing proper and timely information; how it acted as an agency of the government, non-governmental organizations in framing helpful policies; how at times media acted as a vehicle of rumour mongering, misinformation, spread of fear; how it colluded with big and powerful pharmaceutical companies in furthering their business interests; how it almost acted as a lapdog and not a watch dog (which supposed to be its role) in hiding and distorting facts and data to suit the government agenda; how it acted as a tool of government's false propaganda and so forth.

Keywords: Covid-19, Media, Vaccines, Health, China

Introduction

On 31 December 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan city, which subsequently spread to other countries. Initially, the virus was named as a severe acute respiratory syndrome – coronavirus-2, some media reports also called it the 'Wuhan virus', and later, the disease is named Covid-19. Subsequently, the Covid-19 pandemic overwhelmed almost the whole world – it didn't distinguish between male or female, rich or poor, urban or rural population, developed or developing countries, and global south or global north. It placed a strain on economies and health systems worldwide. As of

January 2023, 753,823,259 was the total number of cases and 6,814,976 was the total number of deaths due to Covid-19.¹

The Covid-19 pandemic has led us into a global crisis in mental health. Both the traditional media and the social media have been very helpful in the administration and dissemination of accurate information concerning the virus. This was essential to the expunction of fear and uncertainty —factors that serve to exacerbate stress and mental ill-health. A major advantage of social media and other digital platforms during Covid-19 has been the ease of access to information. This easy accessibility presented ample opportunity for education. Such provision of key information can help reduce the mental health consequences of the pandemic. In the event of a health crisis, smartphones, tablets and other electrical devices are within easy reach and many people turned to newsfeeds on social media platforms along with more traditional sources of media.

In addition to the pandemic the world faced and still facing an “infodemic”² that caused and still causes great damage to health and wealth of humanity. The role of traditional media and social media in spreading disinformation and misinformation has been recognized by the international community. Indeed, numerous conspiracy hypotheses have circulated in all forms of media regarding the imposition of lockdowns as tools of social control, the Chinese origin of the virus, its remedies and cures, and vaccines. Individuals, communities, societies, nations and the whole world had to deal with the plethora of fake news connected to the pandemic. Such fake news only exacerbated the covid situation and created many hurdles in the efforts of non-governmental organizations, and governments to bring the disease under control. In the larger pandemic situation application of inappropriate/ unscientific nomenclatures and geographical prejudices have unwittingly contributed to the destruction of various industries and fomenting of racism.

After United States of America and China, India faced the largest number of Covid-19 cases (44,683,023), and the second largest number of deaths (530, 741).³ In the last nineyears or so most Indian media had compromised their credibility by deliberately choosing to be a lap dog of the regime in power. The credibility vacuum of the Indian media became more pronounced during the

1 According to WHO, <https://covid19.who.int/table>, Accessed on 31, January 2023.

2 An excessive amount of information about a problem that is typically unreliable, spreads rapidly, and makes a solution more difficult to achieve. The World Health Organization used it in 2020 in the context of Covid 19.

3 According to WHO, <https://covid19.who.int/table>, Accessed on 31, January 2023.

pandemic. They chose to ignore facts and figures provided by independent, even neutral foreign media, agencies and became a propaganda mouthpiece of the regime that abdicated responsibility in multiple ways especially during the second wave of the pandemic. In the following pages, we hope to deal with all these in some detail.

1 Conventional Notions about Media's Role in Society

Media's traditional role has been to inform, educate and entertain. Media is thought to perform the social responsibility of providing the citizens with useful information upon which they can make informed decisions and choices on a wide range of issues they consider important. Media is said to be the common man's university in so far it performs the educating function. Media has a special responsibility in reflecting society in all its complexity: providing divergent viewpoints and perspectives - of the old and young, working class and middle class, black and white, women and men, gay and heterosexual and so on. Some would call this the mediating function of the media, whereby the media as a central institution of civil society can bring the institutions of the state and society into dialogue with one another.⁴ Essentially, socially responsible news is defined by its duty to the community transporting conflicts from the plane of violence and vulgarity to that of discussion. Some others see a developmental role for the media in which the media facilitate popular participation in the decision-making process of government.⁵ Next, we examine the question: Did the media play a responsible role during Covid 19. The answer is both yes and no.

1.1 Positive Role of Media During Covid 19

Mass media includes both traditional media such as newspapers, radio, TV news and new media such as the internet/social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). Mass media has been playing a very important role in the dissemination of the Covid-19 related information to the general public and in the dissemination of the Government orders/guidelines to the health workers, sanitation workers, including the police at grassroots levels. Media also promoted handwashing, personal hygiene, social distancing norms, and reporting the COVID cases around the world. A recent

4 Jennifer Hasty, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* (Indiana, US: Indiana University Press, 2005), 07.

5 Francis Arackal, *The Indian Media: How Credible?* (Bombay: Better Yourself Books, 2010), 135.

study⁶ showed that the use of internet/social media was the highest, followed by TV news, before and during lockdown. The use of the internet and TV news increased during the lockdown and the use of newspapers, radio, and magazine declined significantly.

2 Covid 19 and ‘Infodemic’

The Covid-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a parallel ‘infodemic’ that stands for the widespread sharing of false and misleading information about the novel coronavirus. Researcher Jonathan Corpus Ong conceives that ‘infodemic’ is not simply a failure to communicate correct scientific facts, but a fundamental moral failure to cultivate cosmopolitan solidarity and empathy.⁷ Ong goes on to speak about the cultural, regional, and religious biases in journalistic reporting, and claims that official speeches have often reinforced racial prejudices and hierarchies and contributed to discrimination against marginalized communities. He also points to the media manipulation by politicians and authoritarian governments who opportunistically use fears of the virus and ‘fake news’ to seize political control and target dissenters. The crisis period is also witness to racially targeted disinformation, governments’ weaponization of ‘anti-fake news laws,’ and gaps or double standards in platform policy and content moderation.

These are not new trends. Social psychology, media studies, and anthropology have long argued that predictable ‘us-versus-them’ narratives become especially compelling or comforting in the face of uncertainty. The ‘us-versus-them’ Hindu-Muslim divide peaked during the Covid-19 crisis in India, which is our next point.

3 Pandemic and the Secondary Contagion of Communalism

The ‘us-versus-them’ narrative that had been already built up, for many years by now, by the ruling regime in India for the sake of vote-bank politics took a sharper turn during Covid-19. The four thousand and five hundred attendees of a Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) event held at the Markaz (centre) in Delhi’s Nizamuddin area in mid-March 2020 was blamed for spreading the Corona virus in the

6 Dhanyasree et al., “Role of mass media and its impact on general public during coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic in North India: An online assessment,” in *Indian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 2021 May 29; 73(1), 21–25. Published online: doi: 10.25259/IJMS_312_2020.

7 Jonathan Corpus Ong, “The Contagion of Stigmatization: Racism and Discrimination in the ‘Infodemic’ Moment”, Live Research Review Feb4, 2021. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/the-contagion-of-stigmatization-racism-and-discrimination-in-the-infodemic-moment/versions/1-0/>, Accessed on 20, January 2023.

country. Tablighi Jamaat assembly caused spread of Covid-19 among many persons –the Union Home Ministry stated in the Rajya Sabha, 21 September 2020. Nearly 4,300 Covid-19 cases were linked to Tablighi Jamaat event, said the Union Health Ministry. Health Ministry official said that States which have reported fewer number of Covid-19 infections also had cases with links to the Markaz event. The Tablighi Jamaat head's (Maulana Saad) irresponsible conduct has been blamed entirely for the spread of the infection, which added gusto to the demonisation of the larger Muslim community in India. TV news channels (especially Republic, Times Now, and India TV to mention a few), and their sensationalist journalists used the irresponsible conduct of TJ's head as a godsend to further add fuel to the fire of hate and bigotry.

TJ is just one small sub-group of the Deoband school and so demonizing the entire Muslim community was uncalled for. Under criminal law, liability is individualistic. Let alone the entire Muslim community, all the members of TJ or all those who were evacuated from the TJ mosque – the Banglewali Masjid, or Nizamuddin Markaz – cannot be held criminally liable for the wrongs or misdemeanour of the TJ head. One newspaper even published an editorial titled 'Bad apples in the basket', referring to "an annoying 18 percent of its [India's] population self-identifying as rotten apples" and concluding that the ideal solution to the "problem created by bad apples is to get rid of them."⁸

In fact, even the Deoband School has serious differences with TJ and had issued a fatwa against Maulana Saad, calling him 'misguided' and rejecting his interpretations. He is indeed a controversial figure and not many within the Muslim community support him. Muslims, like Hindus, are not a homogenous community. There are several sects, sub-sects and groups within sub-sects like TJ. In the subsequent days, weeks and months communal virus overtook the Corona virus in speed and effect. At a time when real businesses were seeing their worst slowdown in decades, the fake news business was booming in India. If some TV channels termed TJ's irresponsible acts 'corona jihad', others straightaway declared that it was responsible for the criminal conspiracy of spreading Covid-19, making viewers familiar with the term 'super spreaders'.

On 14 April 2020, some news channels tried to hold Muslims responsible for the surge of huge crowds of migrant workers in Mumbai who wanted

8 Faizan Mustafa, <https://thewire.in/communalism/coronavirus-criminal-liability-of-tablighi-jamaat>, Accessed on 26, January 2023.

to go home after the prime minister's announcement of an extension of the nationwide lockdown till 3 May 2020. Soon, similar crowds were seen in several other cities, too. In fact, the super spreader was the *Kumb Mela*. Over 35 lakh people had gathered at Haridwar on 12 April and 13.51 lakh on 14 April 2020. The state of Uttarakhand, home to the KumbMela, recorded 1,713 Covid-19 deaths. According to many foreign media outlets especially reports by *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, and BBC, to mention a few, *Kumb Mela* was the main reason for the outbreak of Covid 19 in India in the subsequent weeks and months. Covid-19 cases across India were traced to weeks long *Kumbh Mela*. But the ruling regime at the centre and a pliable Godi Media (Lapdog media) chose not to admit this fact. This is a glaring example of double standards of communalism in India.

3.1 Covid and Racist Bias in the Media

If in India it was communalism that was at play during the Covid crisis, in the Western world it was racism. In Euro-American contexts, large-scale surveys and journalistic reports have documented increases in physical assaults and racial slurs hurled toward people of East Asian descent, accusing their culture of causing the disease. Within different Asian countries, anti-Chinese sentiment has also surged; neighboring countries' resentments toward Beijing's territorial encroachments on the Indian border, conflict with Taiwan, and in South China Sea and trade disputes have been transferred onto mainland Chinese immigrants or tourists accused of being virus carriers or political spies.⁹

Beyond these appalling incidents of racism against East Asians in general and mainland Chinese in particular, there have been other targets of Covid-19 discrimination and profiling. Black and Latin American people in the United States were already disproportionately affected by the virus by virtue of professional and economic comorbidities. They then became targets of media manipulators, such as when white supremacists circulated conspiracy theories that Black people could not contract the virus. Statistics show that ethnic minorities, especially immigrants on the front lines of health and elder care, have significantly higher mortality rates.¹⁰

Reputable global media outlets occasionally perpetuated Orientalist frames

9 Jonathan Corpus Ong, "The Contagion of Stigmatization: Racism and Discrimination in the "Infodemic" Moment," in *Live Research Review*, Feb 4, 2021. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/the-contagion-of-stigmatization-racism-and-discrimination-in-the-infodemic-moment/versions/1-0/>, Accessed on 10, January 2023.

10 *Ibid.*

in their coverage of Covid-19, with ever-shifting figures of Asia or Orient constructed as ‘others’ less worthy of empathy. Now it has become common place in the health and social sciences to acknowledge and challenge the ‘secondary contagion’ or ‘secondary epidemic’ of Covid-19 racism toward people of Asian descent. We also know very little about platforms’ implementation of their hate speech protocols during this period. We do not know what platforms have done to take down slurs, jokes, and propaganda about Covid-19 racism and racial justice movements.¹¹

Health sciences, communications studies, and ethnic studies researchers arrived at similar findings that right-wing politicians and conservative news media in the United States have been the main amplifiers of racist rhetoric and speech. Trump and several Republican politicians consistently racialized the virus in their insistence during the 2020 Presidential election campaign season to make China “pay for the stimulus bill”.¹² In May 2020, United Nations secretary-general AntónioGuterres issued a statement about the “tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering” unleashed by Covid-19 and urged governments to “strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate”.

4 Types of COVID-19 Information

Information is vital during any health emergencies. In thinking about the Covid-19 outbreak and the deluge of opinion, rumor, and news out there, it’s helpful to delineate the different types of information.

1) Information that’s true.

This includes the most important, practical information—how to avoid it: Wash your hands, avoid crowds, don’t touch your face, sanitize surfaces, and so on. This type of information has been proven accurate and consistent since the outbreak began. This is of course the smallest category of information: mundane but vital.

2) Information that’s false.

Information that’s false includes a wide variety of rumors, miracle cures, misinformation, and so on. In many countries a centre for inquiry related to Covid-19 was set up precisely to help journalists and the public debunk this false information.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

3) Speculation, opinion, and conjecture.

In times of uncertainty, prediction and speculation are rampant. Competing projections about the outbreak vary by orders of magnitude as experts and social media pundits alike share their speculation. Of course, epidemiological models are only as good as the data that goes into them and are based on many premises, variables, and numerous unknowns. Wanting to accurately know the future is of course a venerable tradition.

4) Information that's true but not helpful.

Finally, there's another, less-recognized category: information that is true but not helpful on an individual level, or what might be called 'trivially true'. We usually think of false information being shared as harmful—and it certainly is—but trivially true information can also be harmful to public health. Even when it's not directly harmful, it adds to the background of noise.

One example might include photos of empty store shelves widely shared on social media, showing the lack of supplies such as sanitizer and toilet paper as happened in a developed country like Australia. The information is both true and accurate; it's not being faked or staged. But it's not helpful, because it leads to panic buying, social contagion, and hoarding as people perceive a threat to their welfare and turn an artificial scarcity into a real one.

5 Covid Crisis and Misinformation & Disinformation

The Covid-19 pandemic came at a time when the whole world was already grappling with information overload and pervasive misinformation. In a crisis, humans communicate in a process called collective sensemaking in order to understand uncertain and dynamic circumstances. Collective sense making¹³ is a vital process, but we can make mistakes—or the process can be manipulated and exploited.

Misleading information about the disease has been a problem in diverse societies around the globe. It has been blamed for fatal poisonings in Iran, racial hatred and violence against people of Asian descent, and the use of unproven and potentially dangerous drugs. A video promoting a range of false claims and conspiracy theories about the disease, including an anti-vaccine message, spread widely across social media platforms and around the world. Those spreading misinformation include friends and relatives with the best intentions, opportunists with books and nutritional supplements to sell, and

13 Collective sensemaking, is critical for our decision-making, and in many cases allows us to relieve some of the anxiety and uncertainty we face in order to take action (Comfort et al. 2004; Shklovski et al. 2008).

world leaders trying to consolidate political power. Populist leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Donald Trump of USA, Narendra Modi of India are prime examples of this.

5.1 Defining Misinformation and Disinformation

We can define misinformation as information that is false, but not necessarily intentionally false, and disinformation as false or misleading information that is intentionally created and/or spread for a particular—e.g., financial or political—objective. An early version of mis- and disinformation is ‘rumour’¹⁴, which is information that is unverified, but not necessarily false. Of course, there is a possibility that rumours can turn out to be false—or they can turn out to be true. Crisis events such as Covid-19 are accompanied by high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Officials and authoritative sources may offer limited or untimely information, often influenced by their ruling political masters as happens in India especially in the last nine years (2014–2023). Traditional communication channels such as broadcast and telecast media may break down or may act as the lapdog, rather than a watchdog, of the ruling regime as is the stark reality in India of the present. To fill these gaps, rumouring becomes a collective problem-solving technique—a way to ‘improvise news’ in order to make sense of the unfolding situation and cope with accompanying uncertainties. Studies have shown that significant news events can diffuse extremely rapidly within an attentive public through this process of informal information sharing, or rumouring.

Now rumours that turn out to be false are one contributor to misinformation during crisis events. But misinformation takes on other forms—including fake medical advice such as malaria pills are effective against Covid-19, elaborate conspiracy theories about underlying causes such as China unleashed the Covid-19 virus on rest of the world in order to make sure its global domination, and intentional disinformation campaigns, such as Muslim religious practices are responsible for the spread of the virus in India, that attempt to leverage the crisis for political gain. Both misinformation and disinformation are exceptionally vexing during a crisis, because they feed off and contribute to uncertainty and distrust of governments, journalists, and scientists. To sum up, in the case of public health crises such as Covid-19, misinformation can have life-or-death effects.

14 Some researchers viewed ‘rumor’ as “part and parcel of the efforts of men and women to come to terms with the exigencies of life”.

Media have been party to the floating of conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 virus' spread, its control through medications and vaccinations. "Conspiracy theories add a dimension of perceived intentionality, suggesting that the crisis is being manipulated or that information about it is being purposefully hidden by powerful entities for political or financial gain."¹⁵ Theories have been put forward to say that Covid-19 originated as a result of the Biological warfare that both China and the United States have been engaged in; that Covid-19 virus arose as a result of the use of 5G communication technology and that powerful people are conspiring to hide this 'fact'; that Covid-19 virus was planned as part of a design to reduce world population; that Covid-19 virus was manufactured in order for the pharmaceutical companies to make big profits; that wearing masks and taking vaccinations put people at great health risk; that Covid-19 virus arose as a result of the wrath of God on the sinful world; that Covid-19 virus is a sure sign of the world coming to an end and so forth. As a consequence of conspiracy theories and disinformation promoted by the media people lost trust in the information provided by the media.

Misinformation during a public health crisis can prevent the adoption and use of evidence-based preventative measures and treatments and consequently worsen an epidemic. For example, misinformation spread during the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak may have contributed to negative health outcomes by motivating attacks on health workers and blocking them from providing treatment.¹⁶ We have seen the health effects of misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as incidences of people self-medicating by taking chloroquine, an unproven treatment, drinking alcohol or bleach ('for inner sanitization').

5.2 Covid-19 Disinformation Regulation: When Cures are Worse than the Sickness

Fear of the virus and fear of 'fake news' have converged and ushered in a wave of controversial regulatory measures aiming to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 misinformation. The global trend of social media regulation during

15 Kate Starbird et al., "Misinformation, Crisis, and Public Health—Reviewing the Literature," <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/misinformation-crisis-and-public-health/versions/v1-0/>, Accessed on 10, February 2023.

16 Jonathan Corpus Ong, "The Contagion of Stigmatization: Racism and Discrimination in the "Infodemic" Moment," in *Live Research Review*, Feb 4, 2021. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/the-contagion-of-stigmatization-racism-and-discrimination-in-the-infodemic-moment/versions/1-0/>, Accessed on 10, February 2023.

the pandemic appears to be toward ‘legislative opportunism’—using moral panics about ‘fake news’ and Covid-19 as a pretext to seize control over the information ecosystem. Common features of emergency ‘anti-fake news’ laws in at least 16 countries, including Algeria, Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and Thailand, have been (1) the criminalization of sharing Covid-19 ‘fake news,’ and expansion of penalties to include hefty fines or imprisonment, (2) increased government control and surveillance of social media, (3) broadly phrased definitions of ‘fake news,’ and (4) arbitrary application of these laws.¹⁷

Just as China censored and intimidated coronavirus whistleblowers and critics demanding government accountability, other countries have gone after vulnerable targets and vocal critics. For example, Thailand authorities have retaliated with lawsuits against health workers who exposed corruption and hoarding in the surgical mask supply chain.¹⁸ Human Rights Watch spoke out about the chilling effects of these ‘fake news’ laws, as well as the public health consequences of locking violators in crowded detention facilities where they run a greater risk of contracting the virus.

Academics, journalists, and human rights observers have launched important interventions to track how anti-‘fake news’ measures have been weaponized to target journalists, human rights defenders, and marginalized communities. The International Press Institute (IPI) warned governments against “recklessly misrepresenting media scrutiny as disinformation or misusing the crisis to restrict or punish critical media.”¹⁹ The IPI dashboard has now catalogued more than 400 cases of media freedom violations in global context. For example, one TV station in Albania known to be critical of the prime minister was shut down for allegedly violating social distancing rules in its shows. Elsewhere, the Philippines’ House of Representatives struck an unprecedented blow against press freedom when it voted against the franchise renewal of the nation’s largest broadcast network, which had previously drawn the ire of the country’s populist president.²⁰ Media staff considered ‘essential workers’ have

17 *Ibid.*

18 HRW (Human Rights Watch), “Human Rights Dimensions of COVID-19 Response,” in *Human Rights Watch*. March 19, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-respons>, Accessed on 05, February 2023.

19 International Press Institute (IPI), “Over 80 Groups Demand Release of Jailed Journalists in Africa amid Pandemic,” in *International Press Institute*. April 8, 2020. <https://ipi.media/over-80-groups-demand-release-of-jailed-journalists-in-africa-amid-pandemic/>, Accessed on 10, February 2023.

20 Jason Gutierrez, “Philippine Congress Officially Shuts Down Leading Broadcaster,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2020, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/world/asia/philippines-congress-media-duterte-abs-cbn.html>, Accessed on 12, February 2023.

faced greater risk of harassment, legal intimidation, and arrests, accelerating global trends of repression and distrust of journalists.²¹

Southeast Asian experts had previously warned against securitizing fake news interventions and their challenges to free speech, as the region has implemented ‘widely overreaching’ regulations that compel social media platforms to comply with their orders of content takedowns.²² Under Covid-19, governments have been guilty of copy-pasting provisions of the Singaporean anti-fake news law, ignoring the cautions and objections of critical scholars and journalists. Human rights organizations have argued that governments have exploited Covid-19 to further shrink civic spaces and attack human rights defenders.

5.3 Shooting the Messenger: Glaring Cases

According to a report fifty-five Indian Journalists arrested, booked, threatened for reporting on Covid-19. The report said that as many as 22 FIRs were filed against various journalists while the lockdown was in progress.²³ India’s ratings in the annual World Press Index have been continuously sliding. The 2020 index, put together by Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, has placed India in 142nd position, below neighbours Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. In Egypt, a journalist detained for ‘spreading fake news’ contracted the virus while in custody and died before he could be tried.

Chinese citizen journalist and woman human rights defender Zhang Zhan was arrested after she posted a video criticizing the Chinese Government’s handling of the outbreak of Covid-19 and was accused of spreading false information and stirring up negative sentiment about the epidemic in Wuhan. Zhan has been detained in Pudong New District Detention Centre in Shanghai since May 2020, serving a four-year sentence on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”²⁴ Two European journalists, who were covering the protests in China against the strict coronavirus measures, were arrested on Sunday, 27 November 2022. BBC journalist Ed Lawrence

21 HRW., 2020.

22 Cherian, George, “Disinformation: A Debate That Needs to Be Better Informed,” in Freedom From the Press (blog). October 7, 2019. <https://blog.freedomfromthepress.info/2019/10/07/disinformation-2/>, Accessed on 16, February 2023.

23 The Wire Staff, <https://thewire.in/media/covid-19-journalists-arrested-booked-report>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

24 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/11/china-journalist-jailed-covid-reporting-seriously-ill-must-be-released-un>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

was arrested in Shanghai and was allegedly beaten up by the police, the British public broadcaster said in a statement.²⁵

International Press Institute Director Barbara Trionfi said that “As the world is struggling to assess the origins, dissemination patterns and consequences of the Covid-19 virus, China is shirking its responsibilities and obligations by punishing those journalists who have contributed to disseminating valuable information.”²⁶ According to IPI data, around the world as many as 197 journalists have been arrested or charged for reporting about Covid-19. The Chinese government, however, has not revealed the exact number of journalists arrested in connection with their reporting about the pandemic. In March 2020, China expelled journalists with *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, effectively curbing the coverage of the pandemic by the foreign media in the country.

5.4 Counter Measures to the Infodemic

During a public health crisis, scientists, physicians, communications professionals, and public health officials can play a critical role in informing the public and preventing the spread of misinformation. In particular, public health officials can provide the most up-to-date, accurate health information during public health crises, which can be especially important for vulnerable populations. Distributing factual narratives quickly from health officials is essential to help prevent misinformation. Experts have recommended that public health officials acknowledge the uncertainty of the situation.²⁷

6 Challenges of Public Communication During Covid

Effectively communicating health information to the public, however, can be challenging—especially in the context of an emerging pandemic characterized by high levels of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. The persistent scientific uncertainty with a disease like Covid-19 can make this particularly challenging, as the best information (and the scientific consensus) changes from day to day. The pace of the science combined with the intensity of media coverage about that science is proving particularly challenging for public health communicators during the Covid-19 pandemic. At times public health

25 Scroll Staff, <https://scroll.in/latest/1038471/china-two-european-journalists-arrested-while-covering-protests-against-covid-19-curbs>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

26 Barbara Trionfi, <https://ipi.media/china-jails-citizen-journalists-who-reported-on-covid-19/>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

27 Kate Starbird et al., “Misinformation, Crisis, and Public Health—Reviewing the Literature,” June 25, 2020. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/misinformation-crisis-and-public-health/versions/v1-0/>, Accessed on 18, February 2023.

officials may not be able to acknowledge the uncertainty of the situation because they may be under pressure to appear as if the situation is under control. Another issue is the potential misalignment between the information that is being communicated and what the public is interested in knowing.²⁸

Perhaps the most critical challenge for communicating official information during public health crises is trust. In recent decades, many societies have experienced a loss of trust in the very institutions—such as government and media—that people rely on for information during these events. When public health officials are seen as less credible sources, people tend to turn to informal sources to find health information. Increasingly, those information searchers are going online where new media and social media have disrupted how trust is formed and provided massive visibility to new kinds of influencers.²⁹

6.1 Vaccine Hesitation, Vaccine Acceptance, and Vaccine Efficacy

Media played a major role in sowing distrust in the vaccines developed for the pandemic. Later, media also played a major role in creating awareness regarding the importance of taking the vaccine shots. Lately, though there have been many misgivings in the media regarding the efficacy of the vaccines and its various side effects. Many pharmaceutical companies in the world over have been researching and bringing out different brands of Covid-19 vaccines. Of them 11 were granted Emergency Use Listing (EUL) by WHO: Covovax, Nuvaxovid, Spikevax, Comirnaty, Convidecia, Jcovden, Vaxzevria, Covishield, Covaxin, Covilo, and Coronavac. Initially, populations in many countries were hesitant to take the vaccine shots because of the fear of their effectiveness in curing and preventing the virus and because of the fear of their side-effects. Media reports generated confusion among various sections of the population. For instance, in India Covishield vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of Pune was not readily accepted by the people during the first wave of the virus. The government of India blamed the opposition and the media for the vaccine hesitancy and using this excuse the government sought to export the vaccine to many countries, especially to the neighbouring countries, thus creating vaccine shortages in India. But during the second wave which was going beyond control, vaccine hesitancy gave way to vaccine demand. By then enough vaccines weren't readily available for the huge population of India. People were ready to take the shots even by paying for it.

As of 2 December 2022, India has administered over 2.19 billion doses overall, including first, second and precautionary (booster) doses of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

currently approved vaccines. In India, 95% of the eligible population (12+) has received at least one shot, and 88% of the eligible population (12+) is fully vaccinated.³⁰ According to a June 2022 study published in *The Lancet*, Covid-19 vaccination in India prevented an additional 4.2 million deaths from 8 December 2020, to 8 December 2021. For a time, many brands of vaccines were whole-heartedly accepted by the population. In many western countries sections of the population have gone to the extent of taking up to three booster shots, all paid by the State.

Dr. Katherine O'Brien from WHO states that "So right now, we're in a situation where, as I said, the evidence shows that the vaccines that people have received are holding up really well to protect you against severe disease, against hospitalization and against death. And that's really the primary intent of the vaccines."³¹ Covid-19 vaccines are exceedingly safe. The primary safety concerns are a very rare risk of myocarditis with mRNA vaccines and very rare risks of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia and possibly Guillain-Barre syndrome with adenoviral vector vaccines. Although myriad adverse events have been reported in individuals following vaccine administration, no other severe events have been clearly associated with vaccination after hundreds of millions of doses administered. Vaccine effectiveness wanes over time and is reduced against Omicron and its subvariants. Nevertheless, vaccination continues to substantially reduce the risk of severe disease related to Omicron subvariant infection, particularly following booster doses.³²

6.2 Disaster Capitalism

Originally, it is the title of a best-selling book by famous journalist Antony Loewenstein. Loewenstein travels across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Haiti, Papua New Guinea, the United States, Britain, Greece, and Australia to witness the reality of disaster capitalism. Disaster capitalism supported by media is exactly what happened during the Covid-19 crisis. A pandemic is the "perfect disaster for disaster capitalism" in the analysis of Naomi Klein,³³ referring to the political strategy of using large-scale crises to enrich elites and deepen

30 Union Ministry of Health, <https://www.mohfw.gov.in>, Accessed on 18, February 2023.

31 Dr. Katherine O'Brien, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/media-resources/science-in-5/episode-53---covid-19-boostershots>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

32 <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/covid-19-questions-and-answers>, Accessed on 14, February 2023.

33 Naomi Klein, *The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), 355-389.

inequalities. Media studies research shares this perspective, critiquing digital interventions for introducing ‘second-order disasters’ that compound the effects of the initial disaster. For instance, contact-tracing apps have been found to disproportionately hurt racial minorities in the US, economic migrants in Singapore, and LGBTQ populations in South Korea. In the pandemic moment when people have become more dependent on digital technology, poor people also find themselves in a ‘digital vicious cycle’ in which various digital exclusions would affect their health but also their education, work, and social networks.³⁴

In general, multinational corporations didn’t lose money rather they made huge profits during the pandemic. This is especially true of pharma companies; they exploited the helplessness of the international community to make maxim profits from vaccine production, that too many of them allegedly ineffective against Covid-19. Pfizer vaccine company is reported to be in the forefront of massive fraud. The Pfizer vaccine which was administered in most of the Western world countries like USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and many parts of Europe, has come under fire for allegedly not being able to stop the spread and transmission of Covid-19. Pfizer is also blamed by many for the blood clots and rising heart attacks and strokes across the globe. The Pfizer vaccine was one of the first vaccines to be approved by WHO under emergency clause in December 2020, just 10 months after the world was hit with the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁵ On 20 January 2023 came the news that Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla was questioned by the US Federal authorities in Washington for unethical business practices.

During the Covid-19 crisis many Small and Medium Enterprises in India and elsewhere lost their businesses, some of them became bankrupt as a result of prolonged lockdown. Whereas, big corporations such as Adani Enterprises and Reliance Industries made huge profit. Adani’s profit went up by \$75 billion in 2022 on the strength of the growth in profits made during 2020-2021. Radhika Pandey and Pramod Sinha writes, “The Covid-19 pandemic derailed the economy but acted as a boon for the listed companies. The steep

34 Jonathan Corpus Ong, “The Contagion of Stigmatization: Racism and Discrimination in the ‘Infodemic’ Moment,” in *Live Research Review*, Feb 4, 2021. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/the-contagion-of-stigmatization-racism-and-discrimination-in-the-infodemic-moment/versions/1-0/>, Accessed on 18, February 2023.

35 Dibyendu Mondal, “Question mark on Pfizer vaccine, which some Indians campaigned for,” <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/question-mark-pfizer-vaccine-indians-campaigned>, Accessed on 08, February 2023.

corporate tax cut in 2019 and pandemic-induced cost-cutting boosted the profits of firms. The pandemic year was also the time when Indian companies repaired their leveraged balance sheets.”³⁶

It’s difficult to distinguish the nature of capitalists’ operations from one country to another. So, what we said above holds true also in a country such as Canada.

In 2021, when Canada was in the middle of the covid pandemic, large corporations in all major sectors of the economy saw their profit margins substantially exceed 20 year averages, with many hitting record levels. The Finance, Insurance & Real Estate Sector (FIRE), which already had the highest sectoral profit margin over the last two decades, also had the biggest increase in 2021—reaching a profit margin of 22%.³⁷

These business corporations are in direct or indirect collusion with leading media empires, which advertise their products and in the process make their profit margins possible. For instance, in India the Adani and the Ambani corporations own influential media houses, which act as propaganda tools for their businesses. In our world today businesses cannot run profitably without the nexus with media outlets, either owning them directly, or controlling them through major share-holding. Of course, in the process both business ethics and media ethics take a back-seat.

Scholars of political economy and critical data studies have warned that governments and technology companies are opportunistically implementing surveillance technologies that impinge on people’s everyday freedoms.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages we discussed media’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Media can be broadly categorized as traditional and new media, the latter mainly represented by social media. Traditional media is considered to be more credible than social media due to availability of original source of information, processing of information through journalistic standards and responsibility for accuracy of news. Both the traditional and new media

36 Radhika Pandey and Pramod Singh, “Dissecting the Extraordinary Surge in Corporate Profits,” *Economic & Political Weekly* ISSN (Print) - 0012-9976 | ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2022/25/comment/dissecting-extraordinary-surge-corporate-profits.html>, Accessed on 09, February 2023.

37 Cochrane D.T., <https://www.taxfairness.ca/en/resources/reports/report-rise-corporate-profits-time-covid>, Accessed on 10, February, 2023.

played a great role during the Covid-19 crisis. On the positive side media was helpful in manifold ways of providing necessary and timely information to people. On the other hand, media, especially social media, was also a vehicle of 'infodemic' creating panicky, insecurity, and in many cases affecting people's mental health. So much so, some experts have advised people to self-distance from social media information on the virus, which is a form of social media hygiene. The idea is not to ignore important and useful information about the coronavirus; in fact, it's exactly the opposite: to better distinguish the news from the noise, the relevant from the irrelevant. Before believing or sharing information on social media, ask yourself questions such as: Is it true? Is it from a reliable source? Even if it may be factually true, is it helpful or useful? Does it promote unity or encourage divisiveness? Are you sharing it because it contains practical information important to people's health? Or, are you sharing it just to have something to talk about, some vehicle to share your opinions about? The world will not be the same after Covid-19. Humanity will have to find newer ways of dealing with public health emergencies, considering the developed countries of the West are the worst affected despite their state-of-the art health infrastructures. The United States, in particular, must have realised that its excessive expenditure on the war against terror was flawed and misdirected.

The Imperative of Ecosophy and its Echo in the Pandemic

A. Pushparajan

Abstract:

The imperative of 'ecosophy' echoes in the pandemic Covid-19 for a radical metanoia for our environment in which we inhabit. This approach shall be effected not from the traditional technological and anthropological version of reality as human centered, rather our gravest concern is the preservation of the habitat for the future of our generations and thus respecting nature. In this regard, this article makes an attempt at presenting the ecological crisis in order to elucidate it for the meaning of neologisms 'ecosophy' and thereby arguing for an ecological concern. That realization in turn impel us to appreciate the hues of the echoes as the perversions of modern civilization, and in turn, it should lead us to be seriously be committed to the pursuit of the 'ecological imperative' especially within the context of the pandemic. This can supply us with lessons drawn from the terrific and tragic experience of the pandemic covid-19 with future vision of humanity with its bio-diversity.

Keywords: *oeikos, ecology, ecosophy, ecological imperative, cosmo-thendric, house.*

Introduction

Disasters like the climate change have pointed to a severe warning of erosion of the very biophysical base of the planet. This is precisely what is called ecological crisis. To address this problem variety of responses have emerged during the past few decades.¹ Against this background some philosophical responses also have come in the limelight. One such attempt is called 'Ecosophy.' 'Ecological imperative' is just an offshoot of Ecosophic considerations. It urges us to care for our common home as a moral problem and preserve it for future generations,

¹ Scientists have called for 'Ecological Emergency'. Economists and politicians, executive authorities of countries, nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations have had many conventions and conferences and have come out with Treaties. Faith-based organizations and religious heads like Pope Francis have addressed this problem too. Youth-group activists like Greta Thunberg are also a force to be reckoned with.

as well. It is significant to note that the pandemic Covid-19 echoes the very same imports of the ecological imperative. This paper is a modest attempt, first, to set the background by explaining briefly ecological crisis, and then elucidate the meaning of neologisms: 'Ecosophy' and 'ecological imperative.' The fourth and final part is an attempt to validate the Ecosophic imperative with some of the lessons drawn from the bitter experience of the pandemic Covid-19.

1 The House in Order vs The House in Crisis

The Earth, along with its Great Elements (soil, water, fire, air, and ether) serves as 'huge house' (*oikos*) for all life-forms including the humans. A scientific inquiry into all intricacies of this house is called Ecology. It has established beyond doubt that this 'house of life' is structurally ordered, and functionally organized.

1.1 The Structural Order

The structural order of this house is obvious from the fact that different layers of biosphere, in a well-knit interrelationship so as to contribute to the formation and sustenance of life.

- (1) The crusty surface of the Earth which serves as base for life to thrive. It is called the 'Lithosphere'. For, the Greek word *lithos* means rock; beneath the crust of the Earth there is a layer of rock material that is solid, rigid and relatively cool in contrast to the central core of the Earth which is all fiery and liquid.
- (2) The 'Troposphere' is that part of the Earth's atmosphere extending into 15 kms from the surface of the Earth. In this region weather-changes (*tropos* means turning or mixing) happen according to rising and falling packets of air, and makes rain showers possible.
- (3) 'Stratosphere' is the major layer that extends between 15-50 kms from the Earth. It is in this layer (*stratum*) that ozone molecules are produced which absorb high-energy light (ultraviolet rays) from the Sun and transform it to heat. The ozone layer, at the tip of the 'Stratosphere', consists of three molecules of oxygen, and so, it filters the ultraviolet rays of the sun and sends to Earth only that amount of warmth suitable for the sustenance of life on earth. Again, this layer absorbs ultraviolet radiation from the soil-heat and thus makes the Earth comfortable habitat for life forms.

- (4) 'Mesosphere' (about 50-85 kms above the Earth's surface) is the region of the atmosphere which is above the ozone layer and below the Ionosphere. Here, oxygen atoms are created by breaking oxygen from the ultraviolet rays. These oxygen-atoms bind with oxygen-molecules to form ozone layer.
- (5) 'Ionosphere' or 'Lonosphere' is the region which is filled with atoms which get ionized (gaining or losing of electrons and the electrical charges). It absorbs the most energetic photons from the sun and reflects radio waves, thus making long-distance radio communication possible.
- (6) Finally, the 'Exosphere', the outer space about which we cannot even explore.

These spheres are so ordered and organized as to produce life and to sustain it. So, it is proper to content that the biosphere or eco-sphere (House of life).

1.2 The Harmonious Functioning of the House

What is more marvellous about the house is that the various members of this house, the diverse life forms are made to function harmoniously. The interrelationship as well as the interaction among the diverse life-forms is cyclic, such that there is always a balance and harmony prevailing in this house. Any life-form survives and thrives by getting from its environment all that is necessary for it. But it also contributes to the enrichment of Nature by its activities. The simplest example is the earthworm. The best illustration is the process of photosynthesis. The green plants, while absorbing through their roots water as well as those minerals which are dissolved in water, captures the sunlight and converts the light energy into a chemical energy, assimilating carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and releasing in turn oxygen.

Hence the plant kingdom is called 'producers,' because they give oxygen and energy-rich organic compounds for the 'consumers' or the animal kingdom. Further, animals exhale carbon dioxide in the process of oxygenation. This 'waste' is used by plants for photosynthesis, emitting oxygen which is essential for animals' life. When animals die, their dead bodies are 'decomposed' by the microbes, and thus are reduced into various chemical elements which again become nutrients to the plants. Thus, there is cyclic process of functioning, repeatedly happening in Nature. That is how Mother Nature maintains a perfect balance or harmony among different life-forms. The waste of one species of life becomes the food of another. Nothing is waste nothing is lost.

In sum, the Earth is a self-maintaining and self-dependent house which is so ordered in its structure as to protect life, and is cyclic in its functioning so as to maintain harmony in the house. To put it in religious terminology: The amazingly ordered structure of this House has been so designed by the invisible creative power of the Creator as to function harmoniously and cyclically.

1.3 The Crisis

Over millions of years there had been a healthy interaction of life-forms with their environment such that they not only receive the necessities of life from the environment but also, they enrich the environment in turn. Evolution of diversity of life forms meant their adaptation to different environmental conditions and enrichment of environment. However, with the advent of human life the situation changed drastically.²

Especially, since the Modern Age the scientific revolution and its subsequent consolidation materially in the industrial revolution, the humans have been indulging in excessive exploitation of the natural resources. Now, with the Globalization of the Western economics and technology, natural resources all over the globe have been exploited so continually, increasingly and ruthlessly that the balanced structure of the house has been destroyed. Further, the harmonious cyclic function of Nature has been disrupted by massive deposits of toxic waste. Today, fossil resources are being exploited too quickly and excessively to be replenished. More than that the modern people's attitude,³ world view⁴ and behavioural approach towards Nature⁵ have been only ruining the wonderful structure and function of the house. It is this situation that is called ecological crisis.

In short, it is clear from the above that the humans failed to understand that they are after all only part of nature, and that too a fragile part of the cosmic

2 Even here, the major phase of human history reveals that people did not tamper too much with the good order of the house. The traditional cultures even now cherish such values as, respect for nature, frugal use of energy resources, self-contentment, self-restraint, simplicity of life style, more use of renewable sources than the fossilized resources, all of which help the upkeep of the bio-health of the earth.

3 An 'all-dominating' attitude towards nature, never realizing their responsibility to upkeep the nature as a steward of nature.

4 The 'materialistic' worldview that considers nature as simply material object to be used and be trampled upon rather than seeing nature as a living organism whose parts are not only interrelated but also inter-active.

5 The 'behavioural' approach is that of using the earth simply for one's comfort and convenience, never bothered about enriching the house not even leaving the benefits to their future generations.

Environment. Least have they realized that they needed to abide by the structural laws of the house or to maintain her harmonious functioning. How fittingly Ernest Haeckel (who coined the term “Ecology”) observed about the actual place of humans in the house thus:

As our mother earth is a mere speck in the sunbeam in the illimitable universe, so man himself (*sic*) is but a tiny grain of protoplasm in the perishable framework of organic nature. [This] clearly indicates the true place of man in nature, but it dissipates the prevalent illusion of man’s supreme importance and the arrogance with which he sets himself apart from the illimitable universe and exalts himself to the position of its most valuable element.⁶

In a word, the misunderstanding of their place in this huge house, and misuse of their freedom to violate the natural laws binding structure and function, is precisely the cause of the critical state of unsustainability of the house.

2 Ecosophy

Realizing the depth of this crisis, several attempts at solution were made over the years: publication of papers and books; the production of films and documentaries; social movements, intergovernmental meetings; the drafting of protocols and political statements, Treaties, Agreements, State policies and laws. None of them, I think, has addressed the problem adequately. For, the ecological crisis is ultimately a moral problem. As Sir Edmund Hillary aptly observes: “Environmental problems are really social problems anyway. They begin with people as the cause and end with people as victim.”⁷ They are usually born of ignorance, or apathy, or wanton misuse of freedom for selfish reasons and for excessive profit motive by a few corporates. Thus, humans are morally culpable for the ecological crisis.

Therefore, some philosophers were motivated to critically analyze ecological problems from this moral point of view. They found that the traditional aim of purely academic pursuit of wisdom could not offer the desired solution, and they channeled their resources of wisdom to help enhancing integral relationship of humans with the *Oeikos*. Hence, they coined the neologism: ‘Ecosophy’.

6 Brian Williams, “Ernst Haeckel and the Origins of Ecology,” in *Environmental History*, Last updated 05 Apr 2021, accessed 10 Sep 2021, <https://www.briangwilliams.us/environmental-history/ernst-haeckel-and-the-origins-of-ecology.html>.

7 As cited in Antony Samy F, *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (BYB: St Pauls, 2000), 310.

The principal protagonists are (1) Arne Naess, (2) Felix Guitari, and (3) Raimond Pannikar. A brief account of their views is in order to grasp the import of Ecosophic Imperative.

2.1 Arne Naess

A Norwegian and the father of Deep Ecology, starts with the ecologists' postulate that it has taken billions of years for the House to develop and human species to appear as a last part of the household.⁸ Naess agrees that humans are indeed 'special' because of the power of reason; but he insists upon the fact that they are the most delicate and fragile (physically) members among the inmates of this house. He also points out that humans are precarious members of this house, too. For, they because of their misdirection of the intelligence and misuse of freedom, they are potential danger not only of themselves, rather to the whole planet. In fact, humans are responsible for the irreversible ecological damage with a lot of repercussions on future generations. 'Are we going to handover to our coming generations a barren and polluted world that will be greatly diminished in terms of biodiversity and bio-health?' It is precisely this question that he wants to respond through Ecosophy.

Here, Arne Naess distinguishes between 'ecophilosophy' and 'ecosophy'. Ecophilosophy means philosophy of ecology, or philosophical ecology, structured to examine Nature and our relationship to it. On the contrary, 'Ecosophy' is actually a social need to create awareness about the urgency to care for our common home, and preserve it for future generations. No doubt, it emerges within the matrix of other philosophical traditions, but with a view to exploring the interrelationship of the human with Nature, inducing them to a deeper commitment to environmental concerns. Ecosophy, then, is not simply a branch of Philosophy that focusses analytical thinking, reasoned argument, and carefully examined assumptions of ecology. On the contrary, it is ecological wisdom, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, guiding our conduct toward the environment. It is in fact a 'personal philosophy' that regulates one's behaviour to protect the *Oeikos* for the future generation.

Criticizing the Modern Western Philosophy for its dualistic thought, which formed the basis of the separation of humans from nature, Naess draws a lot of influences from Eastern religious practices, Gandhian non-violent direct action, as well as Spinozan philosophy, and proposes as his own Eco-

8 If one were to mark the time of appearance of the earth, and all the things on the earth in a time-scale of one year duration, the allocation that human species deserve would be the last five minutes only.

philosophy and as a model for individual Ecosophy. In this view-point, therefore, plurality of ecological wisdoms needs to be accepted, specific to local cultures. Therefore, Naess encouraged individuals and communities to develop their own distinctive 'Ecosophy' depending upon cultural and natural diversity. The different cultures and peoples will have their own Ecosophy, because the set of beliefs or norms and assumptions each one has may vary from one individual to another. One must cultivate respect for diversity. This in turn leads us to recognize the ecological wisdom that grows specific to place and context and yet they all affirm the intrinsic value of nature, motivating individuals and communities to commit to protect nature.

Recognition of the diversity of ecosophies and of their unifying factor impelled Naess to initiate Deep Ecology Movement (DEM) for cooperative action to protect the earth. Emphasizing place-specific ecological wisdom, and vernacular technology-practices. "No one philosophy or technology is applicable to the whole planet."⁹ But there are two fundamental principles which binds the DEM: Firstly, all life forms, from small living organisms to human beings, are interconnected and have inherent value; Secondly, the state policies on economics, energy, and environmental should be designed to protect all nature rather than to enhance human life and well-being.¹⁰

2.2 Felix Guattari

Felix Guattari, professionally a French psychiatrist¹¹, was anxious not only about the fact that the 'ecological disequilibrium will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface', but also about the sociological and psychic impact of ecological crisis. In opposition to the capitalist lifestyle, Guattari proposed 'Ecosophy' as an integrated paradigm which takes into account the three ecologies which were identified by Gregory Bateson, namely,

9 Alan Drengson, "Some Thought on the Deep Ecology Movement", accessed 6 June 2021 <http://www.deepecology.org/deepecology.htm>.

10 As against the DEM, the Shallow Ecology Movement (SEM) upholds that nature is worth protecting to the extent that it meets human interests. So, it is concerned primarily with pollution and resource depletion. It is satisfied only with minor reform of the system without fundamental changes in values and practices. Thus, it is anthropocentric in spirit, while DEM is eco-centric.

11 Pierre-Félix Guattari (1930 – 1992), near Blois, French psychiatrist and philosopher and a leader of the antipsychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which challenged established thought in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and sociology. Trained as a psychoanalyst, Guattari worked during the 1950s at La Borde, a clinic near Paris that was noted for its innovative therapeutic practices.

environmental, social and mental.¹² For him ‘Ecosophy’ is “an ethico-political articulation between the three ecologies that unites a care for the earth and its living systems (sociological) and the ideological (mental).”¹³

While sharing with scientific ecology a concern for biological species and the biosphere, Guattari points out that the entire ‘mental ecology’ is also in crisis. So, Ecosophy, according to him, also recognizes ‘incorporeal species’ that are equally endangered: music, the arts, cinema, the relation with time, love and compassion for others. ‘How do we change mentalities, how do we reinvent social practices that would give back to humanity a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival, but equally for the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species? It is to respond to this question that he proposed that “Ecosophy, more than a mere abstract system of thought, calls for a radical change in views and beliefs, challenging long established anthropocentric models ruling over the nature/culture dichotomy, the notion of dominance and property over other species, and ultimate premises of life.”¹⁴ Ecosophy promotes self-discipline, determination, and community organization.

2.3 Raymond Panikkar

Raymond Panikkar defined Ecosophy as the “wisdom of the earth.” We need just to listen to the earth and learn from her. Humans are just interpreters of Ecosophy which is more than our “human wisdom about the earth”. Ecosophy, for Panikkar, is primarily our awareness that we not only belong to the earth, but we and the earth are together. My being is involved in everything I do; I am in the river I swim, the water I drink, the soil I tread upon, the air I breathe, the mountain I climb, the streets I walk, and, of course, and the people I dwell among and so on. Such an attitude could radically change the meaning of our technocratic civilization. The harmony of nature must be restored by something other than simple ecological cosmetics. Ecosophy is a contemporary imperative of human consciousness (cosmic brotherhood).¹⁵

By this, Panikkar does not offer a pantheistic interpretation of life. Rather, his focus is on ‘Cosmotheandric’ vision which considers material things not as objects, or utensils to be used in the house, but rather ‘members’ of the

12 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, and Epistemology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 See Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 354-355, *Christophany*, 6, 168.

household. It is more the way a yogin handles and treats the body than the way an engineer operates with raw or fabricated materials. While technology is a replacement of the spirit understood as mere rationality; Panikkar lays prominence to the rhythm of Being. Life is a play, a dance, but not just fun, and on the other hand, life is also for work and transformation, including tragedies. Metamorphosis does not mean the destruction or alienation of matter; but rather a Eucharistic sublimation.

3 Ecological Imperative

A perceptive look at the different versions of Ecosophy reveals that they all underscore only one point: the need of humankind to recognise that “all living beings have intrinsic value, and that the diversity and richness of life itself has intrinsic value.” Therefore, we need “to develop a genuine, coherent, and sustainable pattern of relations with nature.”¹⁶ This is precisely what is formulated as the “ecological imperative”.

Here also many philosophers have contributed to formulations of ecosophic imperative each in his own way. It is important to consider at least the views of two proponents: Hans Jonas and N. N. Moiseev.

3.1 Hans Jonas

Hans Jonas, a Jewish philosopher, German-born American, raised a strong criticism against modern technology that “the golden promises of modern technology have turned into a threat.”¹⁷ For, ‘the technological civilization sees nature merely as a raw material or standing-reserve for manipulation’. Again, the manipulative actions of technology have resulted in damaging effects on nature and future people.¹⁸

As against it, Jonas affirms that the human cannot be fully human without nature; the destruction of nature is a threat to humans’ own essence. We are part of nature, and therefore we have a responsibility to preserve and protect nature and future. For this the traditional ethics is not of much use, because it is anthropocentric and considers the non-human world as

16 Charles Peirce Sanders, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vol. 5, Hartshorne, Charles; Weiss, Paul; Burks, Arthur W. (eds.), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), 311.

17 Hein Berdinesen, “On Hans Jonas’ The Imperative of Responsibility,” in *Philosophia* 17/2017, 16–28.

18 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility – In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984).

ethically neutral. A classical formulation of the traditional ethics in terms of 'Duty' by Immanuel Kant. By 'duty' Kant meant a moral demand of society which is absolute in this that they need to be followed by all means, irrespective of convenience or hardships, pain or pleasure. He calls this general type of obligation a 'categorical imperative'. He gave three formulations of categorical imperative of which the most well-known formulation is this: 'Act only by that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it be a universal law'.¹⁹

This, for Jonas, remains inadequate in technological civilisation that has created the ecological problems and indefinite future for the coming generations. So, he proposes a 'new ethics of responsibility' as an urgent necessity for new moral imperatives. Accordingly, Jonas re-formulates Kant's categorical imperative thus: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of *genuine human life*." Jonas gave two other formulations ecological imperative, namely, "Act in a way that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of *real human life* on earth. Do not endanger the conditions for the *indefinite survival* of mankind."²⁰ Here, the phrases like 'permanence of *genuine human life*' or '*real human life* on earth' '*indefinite survival*' clearly require the preservation of nature, so that future generations can have the best possible living conditions like fresh air and clean water, and thus, have dignity and integrity.

3.2 N. N. Moiseev

A Russian philosopher N. N. Moiseev starts with his premise that this is "age of noosphere"²¹— a period of evolutionary development which is dominated by the collective mind and collective-will to provide a joint society-nature development. This joint development happens by the principle of co-evolution. So, Moiseev defines the ecological imperative as a complex set of 'restrictions' on human activity non-fulfilment of which can soon turn out to

19 In other words, before you take a decision to do anything, you must ask yourself 'would it be OK if everyone did it in this way?' If for instance you think to tell a lie to somebody, you should ask yourself 'would it be OK if everyone lied to you?' The answer is clearly 'No', because in that case no one will have any meaningful dealings with anyone else. Therefore, for Kant, 'I must never lie'. The act of lying is absolutely wrong.

20 Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt/M: Frankfurt University Press, 1979), 36, Emphasis added.

21 By 'noosphere' is meant a postulated sphere or stage of evolutionary development dominated by consciousness, the mind, and interpersonal relationships.

disastrous consequences for humankind.²² Those restrictions are as follows: Humans have the right for a healthy and fruitful life in harmony with nature, not only for the present but also future generations; The environment should become an integral feature of the social and economic process and shouldn't be considered in isolation from it; Ecologisation of industry must be put into practice in order to eliminate the negative anthropogenic impacts on the environment; and, Social and economic development must improve the quality of people's life in acceptable limits of the economies and ecosystem's capacity.

3.3 The import of the Ecological Imperative

By way of summing up the foregoing considerations the following points may be given as constituting the new ecological ethics:

1. The humans, although unique on account of his power of reason, yet must realize that they are just a speck of the House of life and so their well-being lies only in caring for the whole house.
2. Economic development of the Technological Age cannot exploit the natural resources for the benefits of the few corporates. It cannot destroy the basic conditions of life like fresh air and clean water, which need to be handed over to our future generations.
3. For this to happen, one must be true to the real world as against the present-day trend of indulging in the merely virtual world, the climax of technological enterprises.
4. Coming into contact with the 'real' implies that we will learn to appreciate the cosmic unity of its structure and its beauty of harmony. That in turn calls us to repent for the sin of anthropogenic approach towards biosphere.
5. Acceptance of the cosmic unity obliges the most sophisticated classes of humans to look into the plight of the marginalized masses and the underprivileged. In other words, acceptance of interdependence of human beings is a must.
6. In a world, unless people develop a passion for upholding solidarity/fraternity with the whole creation one cannot live a genuine human life.

22 N. N. Moiseev, *Voskhozhdeniye k razumu* (1993), 120. as quoted in Ecological Imperative: A response to the ecological challenge in Eastern Europe -(wscf-europe.org) accessed on 4 May 2021.

4 The Echoes of Ecosophic Imperative

Ecosophic considerations as well as awareness of the ecological crisis have been aired for several decades, but the desired improvement in environmental protection has not been there sufficiently. In this context, it is significant to note mother earth has impressed upon us the urgency of the issues concerned through echoing the very same imports of Ecosophic Imperative through its sweeping effects of pandemic Covid-19.

4.1 The Aftereffects of Covid-19

The Corona virus, entering into our body and destroying the very body it inhabited, has challenged the antagonistic relationship of humans with Nature. It has, in this short time, unveiled the true nature of human reality. For nearly two years (2019 through Nov-2021) the virus gripped attention of the whole humankind irrespective of race, country, colour, creed, the position, status and grade. It took away the lives of millions of people so abruptly and so unexpectedly, thereby making the whole humankind realize their fragile nature. Thus, it has given us an 'opportunity to learn all we can about what we have been living, about what we have been made to live for a very long time, stretching back at least a generation to the dawn of digitized globalization'.²³

This small organism was also instrumental in causing the lockdowns of human societies all over the world, economic recession, lay-off of well qualified employees, mental depression among the well-to-do-classes of people. The so-called privileged sections of society were driven into their digital burrows, which in turn gave rise to many mental and psychological problems. Working from home and extended-work-hours became the new normal for the executives and other members of the upper strata of society. This in turn led them to reduce their family time. Particularly the children were affected most. They might have acquired some knowledge through online classes. But they had no provisions for physical activity, or psychological interaction with one's peer group. Their missing out of their childhood fun, direct contact with teachers and peer group companionship, all this has affected their psyche. With their use of gadgets as the main source of their learning methods, children were exposed to undue radiation and other health hazards.

More pathetic was the story of the marginalised and informal workers. At the wake of the government-imposed lockdown these masses were forced to

23 Aseem Shrivastava, "A Time for Ecosophy" 01 May, 2020, in *Open*, "<https://openthemagazine.com/essays/a-time-for-ecosophy/>" accessed on 24 September 2021.

come out to streets, having no house to be shut-down. Their livelihoods were affected because of uncertainty about their work-opportunities. The migration of labourers and their starvation became the norm of the day. Thousands of the migrant labourers dared to walk even upto 500 km to reach home. During their journeys they had to sleep on railway tracks. Others had cycled 2,000 km to reach to their village. Undoubtedly, they were exposed to health hazards of all types. But their only desire was to die in the embrace of their beloved ones at home. Of course, they were mentally prepared to die on the way, in any eventuality of being succumbed to the virus.

All this should challenge the people to recognize that all the malaise, mentioned above, is nothing but the echoes of ill effects of failure to follow the ecosophic imperative. Undoubtedly, the virus is a messenger to remind us the obligation to re-imagine our life-vision and re-orient the technological civilization in line with ecological imperative. It is heartening that great leaders have drawn from the pandemic some lessons. For instance, the observations Pope Francis made about the pandemic are worth-noting. Already in a prayer service at the outburst of the Pandemic, the Pontiff marked that “the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties.”²⁴ Further in his historic document *Fratelli Tutti*,²⁵ the Pontiff made some pertinent remarks about the Covid-19 pandemic, which are indeed parallel to the implications of the Ecosophic Imperative.²⁶ A perceptive reading of those remarks will reveal six lessons one needs to learn from the pandemic, Covid-19. They may be formulated in the form of six principles, as mentioned below.

4.2 Lessons that Pope Francis draws from the Pandemic

- (1) ‘One’s Own Good is contained in the Common Good’: “The Covid-19 pandemic has momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all” and hence, “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together” (FT32).

24 Pope Francis, “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Time of Epidemic” (27 March 2020) in *L’Osservatore Romano* (29, March 2020), 10.

25 Pope Francis, *FratelliTuti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Vatican: October, 2020). The citations are marked in Text with paginations.

26 While explaining various factors that hinder the advance of a universal brotherhood of humanity Pope Francis allots five numbered paragraphs to the pandemic Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti* Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (Vatican: Oct. 2020), Ch.1 “Dark Clouds,” Nos 32-37.

- (2) 'Concern for Everyone Rather than for the Benefit of a Few': "The world was relentlessly moving towards an economy that, thanks to technological progress, sought to reduce 'human costs'. Yet the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few" (FT 33 a).
- (3) 'Plunge into the Real and Rethink the Virtual Lifestyle': "Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real. The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence" (FT 33 b).
- (4) 'Recognize the Cosmic Unity': "If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists. ... would it be sufficient to say that the harm we do to nature is itself the punishment for our offences(?). The world is itself crying out in rebellion" (FT 34).
- (5) 'Re-discover Interdependence of Human Society': "No longer should we think in terms of 'them' and 'those', but only 'us'. If only we might keep in mind all those elderly persons who died for lack of respirators, ... If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another... (FT 35).
- (6) 'Cultivate Passion for Upholding Solidarity/Fraternity': "Unless, we recover the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time, our energy and our resources... will collapse and leave many in the grip of anguish and emptiness.... For, the notion of 'every man for himself' will rapidly degenerate into a free-for all that would prove worse than any pandemic" (FT 36).

These observations of Pope Francis, encapsulated in the captions I have given to each, reveal that they correspond to each of the implications of the Ecological Imperative. Thus, the first principle really enunciates the basic axiom of the house, namely the good of any part of the house depends only upon the good of the whole house; The second principle is diagnostic in the sense that it explicates the ills of the economic development which is clearly beneficial a few corporates; The third is also diagnostic in nature as it points to today's malaise of the virtual world which the technocratic civilization has brought us into; The fourth principle is prognostic in this that it articulates the need

to recognize the cosmic unity; The fifth principle is prognostic, too, because it urges us to rediscover interdependence of human society in particular; and the final principle enjoins us to ‘cultivate a shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity’. Here the solidarity is to be meant as that of all biotic and abiotic components of the environment. Thus, our experience of the pandemic situation brings out the corroborative dimension of the ecosophic imperative.

Conclusion

By way of recapitulating what has been said until now, we draw the following conclusion that the humans, as part of the well-structured global *Oeikos* and embedded in its cyclic functioning, are bound by the basic laws that govern this great house. Understanding of this profound truth of this house is precisely the spirit of the ecosophy. The explication of the import Ecosophy is exactly formulation of ecological imperative, which compels one to abide by the ecosophic implications. Some of the lessons of the pandemic are nothing but echoes of the imports of ecological imperative. If humans had not taken up the ecological concerns seriously enough, they are obliged to do so at least now, after the bitter experiences of the pandemic.

Further, by way application, we state the following that if, we really understand the lessons of the pandemic Covid-19, we would clearly realize that the pandemic has only reverberated the imports of ecosophic truths of life. That realization in turn should impel us to appreciate the hues of the echoes as the perversions of modern civilization. That, in turn, should lead us to be seriously be committed to the pursuit of the ‘ecological imperative’. The practical dimension of the foregoing analysis may be illustrated by the finale of a documentary film “Under the Dome” by Chai Jing.²⁷ A mother, after delivering the child with a non-malignant tumor, links the suffering of her baby to the notorious pollution of the modern mechanization of China, and makes the following statement that ‘I have to stand up and do something, and I will do it right now, right here, in the very moment where I am. I am the change.’

‘Shouldn’t this resolve of that mother challenge me to be the change right now, right in my own environment, and at the very moment, where I am?’

²⁷ A day after it was uploaded on websites, there appeared more than 155 million views in Youku (China’s equivalent of YouTube). It became the top trending item on Weibo (China’s equivalent of Twitter) with 270 million hits. Cf “Will new film finally push China to take bold action on pollution?” <http://www.ucanindia.in/news/will-new-film-finally-push-china-to-take-bold-action-on-pollution/28074/daily>, accessed 15 Aug 2021.

CONTRIBUTORS

Prof. A. Pushparajan (*anjelpura@gmail.com*) Professor and Head, Dept. of Interreligious Relations, Madurai Kamaraj University, Coordinator of the School of Philosophy and Religions in the same University, retired in 2004, has authored 20 books, contributed over 350 articles in research journals, and presented over 400 papers in national and international seminars, symposia and conferences. Been a Consulter to Pontifical Council for Faith and Culture, Awardee of Charles Wallace Fellow in Dept. of Religions and Theology, University of Bristol UK, Invitee to the UN Peace Summit of the Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Founding member of the World Council of Religious Leaders, and Member of the Governing Body of the Indian Council of Religious Leaders, Member of the Governing Body of the NBCLC. Presently, resides in Bengaluru, giving guest lectures in his fields of specializations: Interreligious Dialogue, Gandhian Theology, Spirituality, Ecosophy and Eco-Spirituality.

Dr. Francis Arackal Thummy, OP (*farackal@gmail.com*) has a Master's Degree in Philosophy from Nagpur University. Licence in Philosophy from St. Thomas University, Rome. He holds a PG Diploma in Media studies from Griffith College, Dublin, Ireland, and Licence and Doctorate in Social Sciences, specializing in media, from Gregorian and St. Thomas Universities in Rome. He has taught Philosophy and Media for over 25 years at many Institutes and colleges and served as Director of *Gyandhara*, Institute of Philosophy, in Orlim, Goa. From 2012-15 he taught the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Program in the Mass Communication Department, St. Joseph's College (now a University) Bangalore and chaired also as the Head of the Department (HOD). From 2015-2019 he was a full Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Amity University, Gurgaon, Haryana, India. To his credit he has published eight books, presented papers in national and international conferences and seminars. Besides that he has published scientific papers in reputed journals and has a significant presence in online media with a personal website, blogs, and social networking pages offering comments on

economic, political, religious, and social matters. He is currently engaged in part time teaching, research, writing, and pastoral ministry.

Dr. George Panthanmackel, MSFS (*gpanthanmackel@gmail.com*) is Rector of Morning Star Regional Seminary. He served the erstwhile MSFS Northeast India Province as its Provincial from 2014 to 2018. He has been a visiting Professor to several Institutes, including Symbiosis University, Pune. He holds three doctorates: two in Philosophy and one in Theology. He is author of several books and articles. In 2009-2010, he worked at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) as Senior Consultant of Philosophy in the formation of its Philosophy Syllabus and edited the entire BA Instruction Material of Philosophy. He is the Chief Editor of two-volume *CRI Encyclopedia*, Associate Editor of *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. He is also currently the President of the Priests' Section of National CRI.

Dr. Jojo Varakulayil, CST (*varakoocst@gmail.com*) holds Degrees in Psychology, Theology, MA, MPhil and PhD in Philosophy from Husserl Archives: Centre for Phenomenology and Continental Philosophy at Katholieke University Leuven, Belgium. He had his specialization in Phenomenology and Deconstructive Subjectivity. He lectures in Philosophy at different Institutes and Faculties across India and served as the President of the Little Flower Institute of Philosophy & Religion, Aluva, Kerala. He contributes scholarly articles to both International and National level peer-reviewed Journals, and presents papers at Seminars and Workshops both in the International and National Forums. Currently, he is the Superior General of the Little Flower Congregation (CST Fathers), a Clerical Religious Congregation of Pontifical Right.

Dr. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, OFM Cap (*johnsonputhe@gmail.com*) is a specialist in the philosophy Heidegger with Ph.D. from the University of Louvain (Belgium). Presently he is the Rector of Vianney College, Vijnananilayam: Institute of Philosophy and Religion (Eluru, A.P.), where he has been professor of philosophy for more than 30 years. He is one of the pioneers of the 'Association of Christian Philosophers of India' (ACPI); he has been in its administration as Treasurer, Secretary and President for almost twenty years. He has delivered lectures in many Institutes, and presented papers at numerous seminars. To his credit there are several studies published, the acme of which was the two-volume ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for which he was the Editor-in-Chief.

Dr. John Peter Vallabadoss, OFM Cap (*petercapu@gmail.com*) is a Franciscan Capuchin belonging to Amala Annai Province, Tamil Nadu, with 22 years

of teaching experience in philosophy. He has been the Dean of Studies at St. Joseph's Capuchin Philosophical College, Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu, and a visiting faculty at Jnanadeepa (JD), Pune. He has been Treasurer and Secretary, and currently President of Association of Christian Philosophers of India (ACPI). of Association of Christian Philosophers of India. He has been a Consultant in Philosophy at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), for a couple of years developing MA philosophy programme. He has served as Registrar of Vijnananilayam Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Eluru, A.P. He has convened three National Seminars. To his credit he has published three books and edited 4 books and published 45 research articles till date. He has been teaching Indian Philosophy at Centre Sèvres, Jesuit Faculty in Paris (2018-2023), and now a resident professor in Kotagiri Capuchin Philosophical Institute.

Dr. Jose D. Maliekal, SDB (jose.maliekal@gmail.com) belongs to the Salesian Province of Hyderabad, holds a doctorate in Subaltern Fundamental Theology, from the Department of Christian Studies, School of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Madras. He also has authored a book named, *Standstill Utopias? Dalits Encountering Christianity*, which won the James Massey Subaltern Studies Award from ISPCK, Delhi. He is the editor of a Philosophical Compendium, entitled, *Hermeneutics: Truth or/ And Meaning*, and co-editor with Dr Felix Wilfred, *The Struggle for the Past: Historiography Today*. He also has edited for the ACPI, the volume, *Philosophies of Transformative Practice: Social Movements in India*. He has contributed several articles in the area of the interface between Philosophy and Political Economy. At present, he is the academic Co-coordinator of Vishwa Jyothi Don Bosco College, Karunapuram (Institute of Philosophy, Religious Studies and Social Sciences), Hanmakomda District, Telangana where he teaches Systematic philosophy and Social Praxis. He brings to his long career as a teacher of philosophy, a transdisciplinary approach. His areas of research include subaltern perspectives on the production of knowledge, Dalit identities and empowerment, and the impact of religion on socio-economic transformation. He was in the Provincial Animation Team of the Province for nine years. At present, he is a member of the Human Rights Forum (HRF), of Telangana and also the member of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, of Telangana, Kerala, India.

Dr. Joy Alumkal Philipose, OCD (alumkaljoy@gmail.com) is a Carmelite Priest from Kerala, India. He has a Ph.D. in Indian Philosophy from Banaras Hindu University (2012). He holds and M.A. in Indian Philosophy and

Religion with a first rank and gold medal from the same University (2007). He has written a book titled, *Nagarjuna Revisited: Some Recent Interpretations of his Madhyamika Philosophy*. He is NET qualified in Philosophy (2013). He has his Masters in Mysticism from CITEs (Universidad de la Mistica), Avila, Spain (2018). He teaches philosophy and spirituality in different institutes. He presents papers both in philosophy and spirituality in India and abroad. Presently, he is a resident professor at Carmel Hill Philosophy College, Trivandrum, Kerala, India.

Dr. Keith D'Souza, SJ (keith@jesuits.net) is the Rector of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He has an undergraduate degree in Science (Physics), a postgraduate degree in Theology, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Marquette University in Wisconsin, USA. He has taught philosophy and theology for over twenty years at St Pius College, the Mumbai Diocesan Seminary, and has been visiting faculty at several educational institutions. He was the President of the Association of Christian Philosophers from 2015-22 and is the former Vice-President of the Bombay Philosophical Society, based at the Mumbai University. He is presently on the faculty of a Leadership Program called Power to Lead.

Dr. Kuruvilla Pandikattu, SJ (kuru@xlri.ac.in) is a Chair Professor, JRD Tata Foundation for Business Ethics, XLRI, Jamshedpur and former professor of Physics, Philosophy and Religion at JnanaDeepa, Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Pune, India. He is former Dean, Faculty of Philosophy and has been actively involved in the dialogue between science and religion. Author/Editor of more than 45 books and 210 academic articles, Pandikattu is a Jesuit priest belonging to Dumka-Raiganj Province, India. Currently he is pursuing his research at Jesuitenkolleg, Innsbruck, Austria. Main topics of his research are: anthropology, eschatology, life-management and transhumanism. www.kuru.in. GND:124567274 ORCID: 0000-0001-9815-3707.

Dr. Nishant Alphonse Irudayadason (nishant.irudayadason@jdv.edu.in) is a professor of Philosophy and Ethics at Jnana Deepa, Institute of Philosophy and Theology (Papal Athenaeum), Pune, India. He has obtained two doctoral degrees in Ethics and Philosophy from Université Paris-Est and Institut catholique de Paris, France. He also has obtained DEA (equivalent to M.Phil.) in Biblical Theology from France. He holds a Master's degree in Political Science. Currently he is the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Pune. He is also visiting faculty in many colleges and universities in India. He has presented research papers in many National and International Conferences. He has authored two books, edited four books and published many articles

in National and International Journals as well as in edited books. He is a regular contributor to contemporary political analysis in “Light of Truth,” a bimonthly published from Kochi, Kerala. He was the founding director of Jnana Deepa centre for Applied Ethics and was chairperson of the PhD programme in Philosophy at Jnana Deepa.

Dr. Stephen Jayard (sjayard@jdv.edu.in) is a Catholic Priest and a resident Professor, Faculty of Philosophy, Jnana-Deepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Pune, since 2000; and he holds PhD in *Philosophy of Science* from the Central University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, 2009. He has undertaken Post-doctoral research on *Science and Values*, at the Lonergan Institutes, Washington DC & Boston College, Boston, USA and Regis College, Toronto, Canada, 2011-12. To his credit he has published nine Books including *Towards a Theory of Rationality in Science – A Plea to Reasonableness* (2012) and *A Book That Cannot be Titled* (2015), and several articles in the National and International journals and presented research papers at the national and international conferences. He is a visiting faculty at various Institutes of Philosophy and Religion in Abroad and India.

Dr. S. Sekar Sebastin (sekarsebastin@gmail.com) is a priest from the Catholic Diocese of Trichy, Tamil Nadu. He holds a Doctorate in Philosophy from the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas, Rome. He taught philosophy for sixteen years with various capacities as Dean, Registrar at Sacred Heart Seminary, Poonamallee, Chennai and taught philosophy with the capacity of Dean of Philosophy at St Paul's Seminary, Trichy. The area of his interest is Moral Philosophy, Philosophical Anthropology, Postmodernism and History of Western Philosophy. Besides many scholarly articles to his credit in different Philosophical Journals, he is the author of two books and editor of a book in the ACPI series. He served ACPI as its Secretary, and is currently parish priest of St Antony's Church, Kattur, Trichy, Tamilnadu.

Dr. Victor Ferrao (victorferrao@yahoo.co.uk) is a parish priest and a regular columnist in the Goa Newspapers and is a visiting faculty to Patriarchal seminary of Rachol and Jnana Deepa, Pune. He has a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Science, specializing in Science-Religion Dialogue, has authored seven books and has written several research papers in peer reviewed and in reputed journals and edited books. He has served as resident professor of Rachol Seminary for 20 years and coordinator of IGNOU special study centre at Rachol Seminary. He is the co-founder and director of Science Religion Sangam, Goa and actively involved in Science-Religion dialogue.

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