



# The Plague

## **Covid -19 vs “communo-viral dislocation” (covid) in our world: pandemic lessons from Albert Camus’ *The plague***

Abiodun Paul AFOLABI PhD  
Adekunle Ajasin University  
Akungba-Akoko  
Ondo State, Nigeria.

## Abstract

There has been plenty of time for philosophical brooding on the unfolding catastrophe that goes under the name of COVID-19. We have experienced heroism and kindness in some quarters, altruism and vulnerability in some other places, and likewise patient and attentive care in other locales. However, the coronavirus pandemic has also cast light on something that ought to catch our attention. That is, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing flaws in our communo-centric nature as human beings and its contrasting fortunes in our social arrangement. That is why so many lives have been lost despite our understanding of how coronavirus kills. This should jolt us to ask what is complicit in our human conditioning that allowed coronavirus to ravage our world and what kind of social order should be on the ground to help overcome future pandemic like coronavirus. This paper reflects on Albert Camus' thoughts in his novel - *The Plague*. He (Albert Camus) cautions that in the time of the plague, the quintessence of the absurdity of existence is that 'individuals die when the collective fails to recognize or respond adequately to foreseeable threats.' Through a reflexive analysis of some of the characters, I invite citizens of the world to glean from Camus' expose of the liquidating human condition that allowed them take upon de-communal lifestyles thereby widening the margin of communal dislocation in our world. The paper in the end concludes that if we, as citizens of an interconnected world, want a post-pandemic world that is better than the world that Covid-19 has ambushed, we cannot continue to live unaware of our human nature as intrinsically desirous of communal relationship characterized by solidarity, care and empathy which can only thrive in the presence of what I call 'communo-virus.' This is the virus that we must strive to live with, and if our world is infested with such a virus, it will be easier for citizens of the world to respond to future pandemics without a catastrophic loss as it has been experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Applied ethics, pandemic, Albert Camus, communo-virus

## Introduction

The task of overcoming the COVID-19 virus is not only for medical practitioners, scientists and health workers but everyone. Politicians, economists, psychologists have important roles in providing solutions, not in terms of drugs and vaccines but helping us to understand the society we used to live before the pandemic, as well as how we need to organise ourselves to respond to the virus. In this connection, since philosophy addresses fundamental matters of human life through rational reflection, philosophers also have roles to play in the fight against coronavirus. Valazquez [2020] and Metz [2020] explicate some of the areas in which philosophical reflection is needed in addressing COVID-19. For instance, Metz [2020] posits that the philosophers can address questions ranging from allocation of scarce resources during pandemic, whom should we believe about COVID-19 and obedience to all the government rules about COVID-19? [Metz 2020:1-5]. In addition to Metz's submission, I think the philosopher, since she specialises in understanding human nature should also help address the liquidating human nature that has made it possible for coronavirus to have a devastating effect on our world.

This article turns on the light on Albert Camus novel – *The Plague* to help address the liquidating human nature in this COVID-19 era. Before Camus, no philosopher has written directly on epidemics and pandemics. I first encountered Albert Camus' thoughts as a recluse

undergraduate, and his idea of the 'absurd' fascinated me greatly. Later, at Graduate school, I took it upon myself to examine Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdity closely. From there, I discovered his penchant for life without transcendence. This was a huge gamut of an idea to swallow because of my Christian faith, but I must confess that in a twist of Camus' expectation, the circumference of my Christian religious beliefs was expanded by his ludicrous ideas.

Across the pandemic-tinged globe, *The Plague* [1948], a novel about a deadly epidemic in the Algerian town of Oran became more popular<sup>1</sup>. First published in 1947, *The Plague* is a short novel depicting the fictionalised epidemic in the town of Oran and how human beings responded to the epidemic. At this moment, when the vestiges of the COVID-19 pandemic still linger, I have found this work – *The Plague*, a masterpiece to point out critical lessons for citizens of the world in two important areas. First, the analysis of this novel opens up what was lacking in our preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic and second, the human conditioning we need for proactive response to future pandemics. The citizens of the world that I address in this article include every individual in every nation of the world. I address the citizens of the world because of two important reasons. First, there is no boundary to who can be affected by coronavirus and second, human beings everywhere, irrespective of the impact of COVID-19 on their immediate community, need to see themselves first as citizens of one world in the fight against

coronavirus. Seeing ourselves as citizens of one world is important for our preparation and response to overcoming the virus. That is why Famakinwa [2015] posits that 'at birth, all of us as humans, are first and foremost citizens of the world' [Famakinwa 2015: 76].

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the effects of Corona virus on our world and how it opened up our deteriorating communal standing as citizens of the world. The second and third sections provide a philosophical expose of Albert Camus' novel - *The Plague*. While acknowledging the allegorical nature of *The Plague*, this section examines some of the characters in *The Plague* and provides insights on what matters in our preparation, participation, and anticipation of a future pandemic. The last section provides an ideational cure to future pandemics by suggesting 'communo-virus' as a sort of antivirus that is needed to prepare for and address future pandemics.

## COVID-19 Pandemic and the margin of Communal Dislocation in our World

As citizens of the world, the year 2020 and even 2021 will forever be remembered for the grotesque experience of COVID-19 pandemic. The events that unfolded in these two years brought human beings all over the world to their humble knees because it seemed like they were fighting an unknown enemy. Death tolls from the coronavirus pandemic became

---

<sup>1</sup> The sales of Camus' *The Plague* went up in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. 1,600 copies were being sold in a week in France in the last week of January, 2020. See <https://www.actualitte.com/article/monde-edition/italie-a-l-ere-du-coronavirus-la- peste-de-camus-devient-un-bes-t-seller/99478>

headline news for many months as the government of all nations, particularly in the Global North, struggled to contain the gruelling effects of the virus. Different measures were deployed to curb the spread of the virus. Lockdowns, quarantine, social distancing, and social grants became popular in our social life. In many countries, social interactions [in their different forms] were prohibited as a precautionary measure to prevent the transference of the virus. Health workers were called upon to assist in determining the extent of the spread of the virus by conducting tests, isolating and providing treatment to those who were infected. Despite all these measures, a huge number of lives were lost.

At the initial stage of the outbreak of coronavirus, many people were neither interested in the news about the virus in their immediate communities nor were they moved by its devastating effects in lands far from them. However, when it was declared a pandemic by World Health Organisation, they became serious about the existential threat we are faced with. Social gatherings were chopped off by government regulations. Family members and loved ones had to abide by lockdown rules to the detriment of their family and communal bonding. Human beings all over the world became torn by the demands of helping vulnerable others and yet tried to hold their own so that they would not be the next victim of the virus.

The response to the coronavirus pandemic from rich and poor nations of the world, could easily be passed for some sort of courage-

ous intervention. However, from the experience of COVID-19 pandemic, one could become sceptical about our human nature and particularly how we have understood our interconnectedness with each other in this world. In this COVID era, we have suddenly realised that our usually-thought big world is now an unusually close-knitted community where we are all sustained by common resources, and at the same time, gravitating towards the same end. For most people and governments of many nations, healthcare, peace, safety, and survival became the common denominator. Yet, there is little that we could do to guarantee everyone these perks of communal living during the COVID-19 pandemic. The banality of our communal living became clearly inscribed in the annals of time. The confirmation of such stares us by the lives that have been lost and the dismissed cautions to act to preserve other lives by those wielding political authority. What we were not used to - helping others - became what we needed to do to avert the looming catastrophe that was upon us. Suddenly, the aura of a communal life became liveable even in the most gruelling circumstances. The exciting relationship with things suddenly became unimportant as we all seem to care for each other in difficult ways.

Some Scholars from Africa have pointed our attention, in different ways, to the necessity of communal living as the basis for a meaningful existence and effective socio-political organisation (see [Agulanna 2010: 282-298; Metz 2017])<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Metz [2017] suggests that the principles of ‘so-

lidity’ and ‘identity’ are the supervening features of communal life. Identity here, according to Metz, requires ‘identifying with others, that is, considering oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing a way of life, belonging, and being bound up with others’ [Metz, 2017:118]. For Metz, solidarity means “achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, advancing the common good, servicing and being committed to others’ good” [Met 2017:118]. Upholding these principles entails taking a proactive stance in the face of impending danger like COVID-19 pandemic. I will discuss later how these two principles were lacking during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Identity and solidarity are important communal traits that were lacking among nations at the inception of the pandemic. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, some people in Africa were nonchalant about the virus. Some of them dismissed the threat of the virus on the ignoble stance that it is a disease for the rich, while others castigated news of the virus on the premise that it has nothing to do with people in the tropics. Political leaders in Africa and elsewhere were complicit in exacerbating the threat of the virus by being reluctant to deal with the super spreader sectors like airlines, leisure, and entertainment until the fatalities got to heightened proportions. Powerful nations saw no reason why they should act simply because the operation of the virus was thought to be limited to faraway land beyond their territorial domain. However, when it became clear that distance was not a barrier to the virus, they resorted to passing the buck. For

---

<sup>2</sup> Agulanna’s support for communalism was from the backdrop of his argument that people need the protective cover of the community to live meaningful lives. See Agulanna, 2010.

instance, Donald Trump, the then President of the United States, who had the power to wade in and help in curtailing the onslaught of the virus, saw it as a ‘Chinese virus’ thereby ‘conceptualising the disease along nationalist lines’ [Simon Estok 2021].

All the above suggest that an important facet of our communal life is gradually eroding. Our acceleration towards unbridled individualism is fast becoming a great disservice in the most critical times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw cases where some human beings elsewhere decided to prioritise themselves and consider less the impact of their actions on others. Individuals who first had contact with the virus knew the importance of mobility in spreading the virus and yet insisted on leaving their location, thereby spreading the virus. For instance, the first carrier of the virus in Nigeria was an Italian that flew into the country, possibly for business reasons.

One particular feature of communal relations is taking action in the face of an appearance of danger. Even when it seems like the effects of the virus have not gotten

**... our minds should turn to the de-communal actions and behaviour that have been complicit before and during the pandemic. The communal ways of living that prioritise salient practices like harmony, solidarity, identifying with and helping the vulnerable others when having capacity is fast liquidating in our world.**

to most countries, authorities in these countries were reluctant to take action because the real manifestation of the virus is not at their nation’s doorsteps. To show our broken communal understanding in practice, many people declined to take necessary actions like social distancing and avoiding crowded areas under the pretext that the virus is not real. One Harvard University teacher during the pandemic said, “The main problem of most humans is that they don’t believe unless they see with their own eyes and they don’t accept unless they are affected” see [Fariba Ansari 2021:22]. While this was the situation during the pandemic, I think it is anti-communal to wait and see the reality of danger or be in danger before taking action.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate lives and economies across the globe, our minds should turn to the de-communal actions and behaviour that have been complicit before and during the pandemic. The communal ways of living that prioritise salient practices like harmony, solidarity, identifying with and helping the vulnerable others when having capacity is fast liquidating in our world. Consequently, this has widened the margin of communal dislocation in our world. We, as citizens of this interconnected world, must therefore find ways to address this dire situation. That is why I turn to Albert Camus’ novel – *The Plague* for the right inspiration.



## Albert Camus' *The Plague* and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The themes of existentialist thoughts have been broadened by Albert Camus, who often made it clear that he does not want to be regarded as an existentialist. Camus was born in Algeria. Although regarded as an existentialist philosopher, he was also a journalist, writer, and a member of the French resistance to the Nazi occupation<sup>3</sup>. In his novel - *The Plague* published in 1947, Albert Camus described the situation of Oran in the time of a devastating cholera outbreak. The narration of how the epidemic ravaged the town of Oran, and the response of the people is a good anecdote for teaching sundry lessons in the COVID-19 era.

Just like in Oran, a small town in Algeria, the coronavirus pandemic started in the small town of Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Camus makes it clear at the

beginning of the novel that the town of Oran has built life around trade and commerce, and the very essence of humanity – interrelationship - has been snoozed. It took the outbreak of the cholera disease to realise this [Camus, 1948]. One might say that the first downside of our cultural attitude after the coronavirus struck China was a disposition to pretend as though we had no human feelings, and we are distant neighbours without shared ties. We kept on with business as usual.

During the cholera outbreak, the town of Oran had to be closed. Visitors were not allowed into the town, and those who were in town during the outbreak could not leave. The consequence was the sudden separation of people who were not prepared for it. Mothers and children, wives, husbands and lovers, who have imagined a few days earlier that they were embarking on a temporary separation, sure that they will see one another a few days or a few weeks later,

could only not hesitate to abide by the restriction of movement by the Oran authorities [Camus 1948]. In the same vein, the corona virus outbreak also severed some people from their loved ones while others were severed from what they have always loved to do. With gatherings and movement restricted, everyone had to find out how best to live without the daily motion that usually dots their lives before the pandemic.

Unlike in the COVID era, where we had the luxury of technology to close the communication distance among loved ones, during the outbreak in Oran, telephone and letter writing conversations were first controlled and later banned for fear of spreading the disease through such noble activity. The narrator in *The Plague* posits that “creatures bound together by mutual sympathy, flesh, and heart, were reduced to finding the signs of ancient communion to get a feel of their loved ones.” [Camus 1948]. Drastic measures had to be

3 For a fascinating glimpse into Camus' life, have a look at Herbert R. Lottman 1979. *Albert Camus: A Biography*.



taken at Oran to curtail the onslaught of the epidemic. Same with the Covid-19 pandemic, drastic measures that affected the world's economy were taken in various sectors like education, transportation, and leisure to prevent the spread of the virus. We suddenly realise that life is more important compared to all these other activities. The abrupt separation from our loved ones and the activities that we so much cherish was accepted as a good alternative provided it will reduce the spread of the deadly virus. Camus says that the people of Oran, "had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky" [Camus 1948]. Since we could not do anything against being grounded during the pan-

demic, contentment, a word that we rarely want to invite into our lives, became our default attitude. We had to be content with the gift of life and the privilege to be loved by those who showed they loved us.

In Oran, just like in our coronavirus-infested world, amidst the feelings of fear and trepidation, some others had personal interest occupying the foreground of their thoughts. The myth that alcohol protects from, or cures COVID-19 was rife in some places.<sup>4</sup> People whose addiction to alcohol had no bounds fought very hard not to play by lockdown rules. They found arguments to arm-twist the government to allow the sale of alcohol. Some chose to test death

by refusing to wear a face mask and purposefully seeking out large groups of people to socialise with, thereby exacerbating the spread of the virus.

The plague lasted several months but the people of Oran later admitted that they needed to detach themselves from their economic routine and accept their social responsibility to fight the plague. Taking responsibility to secure our lives during the coronavirus pandemic was non-negotiable but the scope of such responsibility was narrow and damning since what ought to be done was not seen as urgent and selfless. I will in the next section examine some of the characters in *The Plague*.

---

<sup>4</sup> For instance, In Kenya, the myth that alcohol cures coronavirus surfaced at some point. See <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/fbchecks/no-drinking-alcohol-wont-kill-coronavirus>

## Learning from the Characters in *The Plague*

Many characters featured in the experience of the plague at Oran. Some of these characters displayed affective virtues noteworthy in pandemic times. Jean Tarrou, Benjamin Rieux, Fr Paneloux's, and the people of Oran acted in ways that should beckon our reflection as citizens of one world. Their actions and inactions in dealing with the cholera epidemic provide veritable lessons for every nation striving to overcome coronavirus that has crippled their world.

Jean Tarrou, I think, is the most admirable character in *The Plague*. Despite being a stranger visiting town and despite his lack of professional medical training, when he encounters the epidemic, he sees what needs to be done, and he does it. Although he was an atheist, he put forward a saintly attitude in the face of death. This he did by first volunteering himself and also organising Adhoc health workers to help turn around the fortunes of the community struggling under the weight of the epidemic. Tarrou could not turn the tide of the plague, and he was unable to save the lives of many people affected by it; but still, he stands, stalwart, unyielding, convinced of the rightness

of his actions, willing to risk death to save others. For him, human catastrophes have a positive side because they force people to "rise above themselves" [Camus 1948]. Tarrou's action in the face of death suggests that human existence gains meaning only when people choose freely to participate in the losing but noble struggle against death and suffering. In fact, selfless attitude in the face of death is noble, and he does eventually die from the plague, becoming the epidemic's last victim. Tarrou's character gives clear examples of Attoe and Chimakonam's suggestion of how Covid-19 pandemic offers meaning to human life and existence [see Attoe and Chimakonam 2021].

Tarrou's character during the outbreak is a lesson in altruism for those who do not understand the sacrifice of many frontline workers that submitted their vulnerability for the good of others. Some individuals, doctors, and nurses, sacrificed themselves for the greater good, by exposing themselves to illness and exhaustion, thereby weakening their own vulnerability. While other people simply looked for how to profit from the misery of others, many health workers had to yield themselves to the risk of infection by taking upon more than they were ever expected to do in preserving

life. Some of them eventually lost their lives.

Benjamin Rieux was another character whose conduct during the epidemic begat mixed thoughts. He was the doctor tasked by the city government with responding to the plague. In the novel, he was described as a stalwart man, capable of enduring a great deal, and is quite used to administrators who fail to heed his concerns [Camus 1948]. Dr Rieux defied all odds to continue working despite the increasing death toll, an attitude that some health workers could not emulate during the coronavirus pandemic. Some health workers accepted the recommendation of staying back at home to preserve their lives, thereby contradicting the Hippocratic Oath they swore.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these qualities, Rieux is not, for Camus, a virtuous person, for he is not angry enough with the bureaucratic system to force the rapid measures needed. Unlike Tarrou, Rieux is part of the city's establishment. Although capable of reflection, of self-awareness, of deep thought, the powerlessness of Rieux was shown through his inability to act at the administrative level early in the story. What could be more absurd than becoming aware of the danger of a crisis only by living through it, as

---

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph S. Alpert notes that most of our older doctors and staff here in Tucson accepted the hospital's recommendation to go home, and that was most appropriate for them to do. See Joseph S. 2020. "Life Imitates Art: Physicians in the time of Plague" *The American Journal of Medicine*



though it were predestined to happen and nothing one does could change that? This seems to be the situation in our world.

In our COVID maligned world, we need professionals who will act towards transforming the systemic decadence in our institutions. Health professionals must be forthright with political authorities that investing in health is a great investment. This has been the call of doctors during the pandemic. Despite this suggestion by doctors in Africa, many African leaders still cannot understand, perhaps because they did not get to battle coronavirus for as long as India, Brazil, Italy, United Kingdom, and USA. Some medical doctors in Africa have given up the fight, thereby seeking greener pastures in other continents where their professional aspirations will receive the needed support.

From the lives of the people of Oran, we learn to live with regard for each other. Before the outbreak of the plague, the bulk of the population of Oran was primarily concerned with making money.

The narrator writes:

**“Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, ‘doing business’. Naturally they don’t eschew such simpler pleasures as love-making, sea-bathing, going to the pictures. But, very sensibly, they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons and Sundays and employ the rest of the week in making money, as much as possible.”** [Camus 1948]

We ought not to forget that the culture of the town itself is what drives things in this direction. The citizens were unaware that a plague was possible, being preoccupied with the pursuit of money. Their lack of vigilance ultimately leads to destruction and grief. The

citizens of our world were also complacent this same way before coronavirus struck. We cannot feign innocence.

Through the narratives in *The Plague*, once again, we can see echoes of Camus’ challenge to religion, particularly Christianity’s ‘self-professed moral superiority’ in the face of pandemic [Bentley 2020:2]. Through the character of Dr Rieux and Fr Paneloux, Camus, once again pointed out why a reliance only on transcendence in the face of absurdity is suicidal. With the outbreak of COVID-19, it did not take long for religious leaders all over the world to make theological and biblical pronouncements along similar lines to that which was made in Fr Paneloux’s first sermon after the epidemic broke out in Oran. Many religious leaders ignored calls for physical distancing, asking their congregants to believe that the virus could be defeated through their faith in God. They reeled out scriptures to justify their stand. While this approach has its merits, in that it gave some kind of succour to those who are gripped by fear, however, to remove personal and societal responsibility from the individual and to limit their responses to gazing heavenward, asking what needs to be done to appease God so that their suffering may cease, is an overt expression of slavish religion. Religious adherents must learn from Dr. Rieux, and Jean Tarrou who did not merely rely on God during the pandemic but took responsibility in the face of adversity.

Religious adherents must be present in real existential crises rather than remaining in the cave of transcendental and metaphysical presuppositions. They cannot sit as God’s servants and expect

frontline workers to be the ones that carry out acts of mercy. Wright [2020] argues that “the Christian vocation is not endowed with the ability to explain the suffering experienced in the world, but that Christianity facilitates a process of lament and mourning where the possibility of healing and restoration become actualised in the person’s fellowship with God, leading to new opportunities for acts of kindness, scientific understanding, hope and wisdom” [Wright 2020].

Towards the end of the novel, the conversation between Cottard and Tarrou over the aftermath of the plague is quite illuminating. Cottard asked Tarrou if the plague had changed anything and if the life of the town would go on as before, exactly as if nothing had happened? Tarrou’s response was quite interesting. Tarrou replied that “he thought that the plague would have changed things [material] and not changed them [the people]. He states further that; “naturally our fellow citizens’ strongest desire was and would be, to behave as if nothing had changed and for that reason, nothing would be changed, in a sense” [Camus 1948]. Let me drive home the lesson here.

In our COVID-19 infested world, with the discovery of vaccines, we still cannot expect that we have dealt with the virus. We must not pass through this period without allowing the experience of the pandemic to change our insipid nature. We cannot be blind to the outside world after the pandemic seemingly triumphant over the plague, forgetting the plight of those whose vulnerability has been exacerbated by the pandemic. For those who at this moment are dedicating themselves to a lifelong memory of bereave-

ment, for the mothers, husbands, wives, and lovers who had lost all joy, now that the loved one lay in a death-pit, the plague had not yet ended. That is why we must endeavor to think about the virus in our human condition that has contributed to the devastating effect that coronavirus had on our world.

### **Call to ‘Communo viral’ Relationship (Communal Relationship) for Future Pandemics**

In this dreadful time when the coronavirus pandemic has battered our world and its inhabitants, we must still look at the big picture and see how we have been presented with significant possibilities for redeeming our liquidating humanity. The incredible challenges we’ve faced and still face in the COVID-19 crisis bring with them meaningful opportunities for personal and societal transformation. However, these opportunities, I think, hang in the balance, and we should be concerned that we might fail to grasp them, or worse, that we will fall prey to the danger of following the same path that led us to this present perplexing situation.

The triumph over coronavirus will be measured over a long period, and so we must endeavour to address it in a manner that depicts long-term preparation, should there be a similar occurrence of this pandemic in the future. To address this, we must look within ourselves and think about what anti-virus we can generate from within our human makeup. It is quite important to accelerate scientific research to discover vac-

cines that can suppress the threat of coronavirus. However, before scrambling for vaccines and committing funds to technological innovations that can help defeat the virus, we have a more sophisticated anti-virus in the thoughts and ideas that we can put forward to guide our daily living. The correct diagnosis of the necessary ideas for our day-to-day living can help us prepare and overcome future pandemics with little fatality. How is this possible? Let me first provide an analogy between philosophical ideas and viruses.

Philosophy, for example, is similar to the virus in that it pushes us to set priorities and make us aware of our finiteness. The spread of deadly viruses, on the other hand, reminds us of the need to admit our ignorance about what is happening and seek to know where the solution lies. Valazquez explains further the analogy between the spread of the virus and philosophical ideas. He says:

**“There are deeper reasons for this analogy and the first is that both are invisible and are transmitted from one person to another. Philosophy is transmitted through ideas most of the time in an oral form, and also viruses, such as COVID-19, are transmitted through very small drops of saliva that come out of the mouth, while their diffusion is so rapid that even in the case of ideas it is used say that they have become “viral”. The virus entering the body, acts as a dangerous agent that puts our health at risk. Philosophy does not enter the body but into the mind, yet certain philosophical ideas can also be considered a threat to man, as happened during some historical occasions. For instance, Socrates was put to death because his ideas were considered as a threat to the power structures of the time”** [Valazquez 2020: 94]

From the above argument of Valazquez, we can see why philosophical ideas, just like viruses, when they spread in societies, can profoundly influence the course of history for better or worse. Philosophical ideas can provoke and determine profound changes in mentality. Hence, if we must

recount the disservice that viral infection does to human metabolism and the society at large, then we must also think of how viral infection, if dealt with, could help to build immunity and community in the long term.

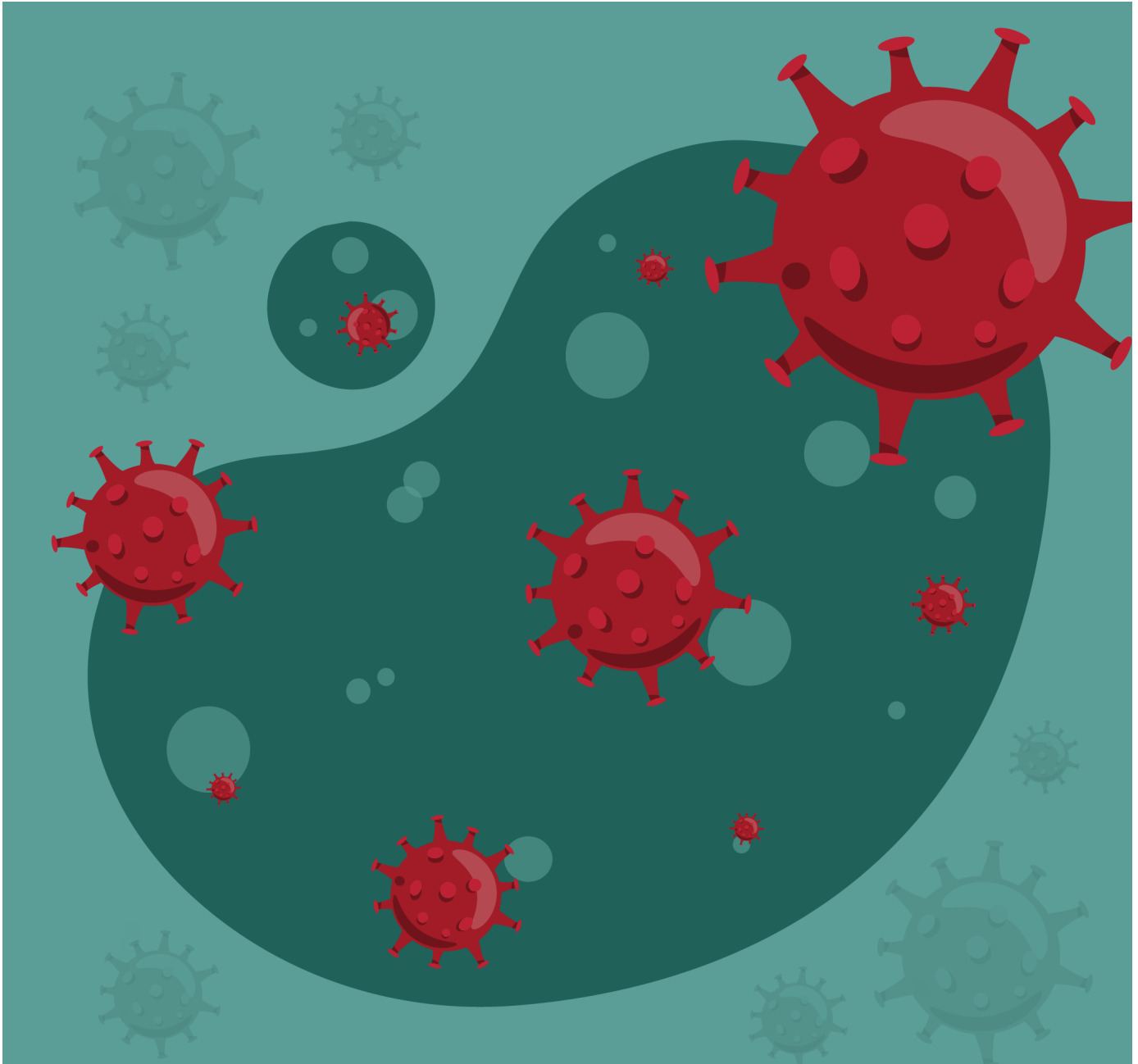
The anti-virus that is needed for a future pandemic is what I call ‘communo-virus’. The word ‘communo’ is from a community. The word ‘virus’ in the popular sense connotes morbidity and mortality and it might sound contradictory to use the term alongside ‘communo’ which signifies community in this context. However, the negative reputation that comes with the word ‘virus’ is not usually deserved every time the word ‘virus’ is used. Even in scientific parlance, not all viruses are destroyed. Marilyn Roossinck, Professor of plant pathology and environmental microbiology at the Pennsylvania State University in her review of the current literature on beneficial viruses,

analysed how some viruses, like bacteria, can be important beneficial microbes in human health and agriculture [Roossinck 2015: 6532-6535]. This suggests that not all viruses are destructive, and some viruses can, as a matter of fact, be very useful. In this context, I use the term ‘virus’ to

denote an infection that has the capacity to transform. From this understanding, ‘communo-virus’ is a term I use to describe a mental virus in the form of an idea that is responsible for secreting the adrenaline that promotes relationship, harmony, and solidarity among human beings, thereby contributing to the acceleration of communal living in our world. This kind of virus must be embraced in our day-to-day lives. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor, must realise that living with this virus does everyone good.

Our vulnerability as isolated human beings, no matter our gender, class, and race, has been rudely shoved to our faces during the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, during the pandemic, even the rich politicians needed the services of health workers to get back their lives when coronavirus struck them. Doctors clearly understood that they were not alone in the business of saving lives; they needed policymakers and security personnel to enforce lockdown and quarantine rules to prevent them from facing overwhelming situations daily.

Our interconnectedness as human beings works better when we understand the ties that bind us. A ‘communo-virus’ would be like the magnet that connects citizens of the world with these ties and suppresses the egoistic nature in us that might want to dominate. This virus is needed to deal with what Farheen Shakir calls the “reification of human beings” – a situation in our capitalistic world where human beings are seen as having ‘use-value’ that strips away intrinsic moral relationships that should characterise our communal life [Farheen Shakir 2020: 47].



In our societal arrangement, we must be able to show that anyone that is lacking in this ‘communo virus’ has not been cured of the instinct to kill another human being or at least the tendency to bring about other people’s death by action or inaction. This is because the tendency to focus on self in the face of impending danger to all still lurks within such individuals. Such a tendency, we can admit, is detrimental to the life of others. Similarly, we need to clearly set up our global polity so that nations that do not priori-

tise actions flowing from the working of ‘communo virus’ are set up for fatality in the event of pandemic. The actions of Torrou in *The Plague* provide a clue about the character of one who lived with ‘communo-virus’. His selfless character spans through the novel. Tarrou was someone who became self-aware and worked to change himself by identifying with and helping others that are in dire situations. And when he was in a critical position after contracting the disease, he was very cautious not to spread the disease.

The narrator notes that Tarrou’s final days are ‘spent keeping that endless watch upon [himself] lest in a careless moment [he] should breathe in somebody’s face and fasten the infection upon him.’ It takes personal and societal responsibility towards others to act in this manner.

Perhaps, the most absurd observation that needs to be made from the reading of the book is the sense in which Camus suggests that, for the city of Oran, the plague is, in fact, the cure.

Dylan Daniel explains this well when he distinguishes the two senses in which the plague was used in the novel. He says;

**“The first sense of ‘plague’ in the text is literal – a disastrous epidemic which ravages the town of Oran in Algeria, so that it must be strictly quarantined. However, the second sense in which the term is employed in the novel is more striking, and more enduring. It stands for a decadence of culture which has led Oran into a currency-fixated complacency, especially with respect to the fragility of the relationship between humanity and nature. This complacency results in a lack of vigilance and a resulting inability to mount adequate defences against the outbreak, which ultimately, tragically, claims the lives of far too many of the town’s citizens. It’s possible to read the book in such a way as to ascribe the outbreak of plague in the first sense to the prevalence of the plague in the second sense”** [Dylan Daniel 2020]

That is to say, just like the plague, COVID-19 has killed too many and caused too much grief, however, we must not lose sight that it has also broken down the immoral conditions in our human nature to which the inhabitants of our world have prioritised before COVID struck. Hence, the coronavirus pandemic calls us back to solidarity, care and support as citizens of one global community.

## Conclusion

COVID-19, in a way, brings citizens of this world to an absurd kind of reality. What makes COVID-19 absurd is the effect it has on our experience of life. I have shown that to overcome this absurd experience, we have to come to terms with our liquidating human condition, particularly the way we relate as citizens of one world. I have discussed how Camus’ *The Plague* provides existentialist tropes that have powerful resonance in this age of COVID-19. Through some of the characters in *The Plague*, I pointed out what was lacking in our human conditioning in our response to COVID-19 pandemic. I explained how COVID-19 opened up de-communal traits in our lives as citizens of the world and its implications for our interconnected world.

We must be humble enough to accept the fragility of our communal standing and the vulnerability of our world in the presence of the condescending way of life that has allowed coronavirus to thrive. It should now be clear to us that a world that is constantly accelerating its de-communal tendencies cannot survive the COVID-19 virus or its future equivalent. If we want a post-pandemic world that is better than the world that Covid-19 has ambushed, we cannot continue to live unaware of our human nature as intrinsically desirous of communal relationships characterised by solidarity, care, and empathy. I have argued that these communal traits can only thrive in the presence of ‘communo-virus.’ This is the virus that we must strive to live with, and if everyone in our world is infected with such virus, it will be easier to respond to future pandemics without a catastrophic loss as it has been experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Literature Cited

- AGULANNA, C. 2010. Community and Human wellbeing in an African Culture *Trames*, 14[64/59], 3: 282–98.
- ANSARI, F. 2021. *The Art of War against CoronaVirus* Zanjan: Satr and Qalam publication.
- ATTOE, A. David, CHIMAKONAM, J.O. 2021. The Covid-19 Pandemic and Meaning in Life, *Phronimon*, vol. 21, 1-12.
- BENTLEY, W. 2020. Reflections on the characters of Dr Rieux and Fr Paneloux in Camus' *The Plague* in a consideration of human suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 76/4: 1-7.
- CAMUS, A. 1948. *The Plague* Translated by Stuart Gilbert New York: The Modern Library
- DANIEL, D. 2020. The Plague and the Plague, *Philosophy Now Online Magazine Issue 138* [https://philosophynow.org/issues/138/The\\_Plague\\_and\\_The\\_Plague](https://philosophynow.org/issues/138/The_Plague_and_The_Plague)
- FAMAKINWA, J.O. 2015. The Communitarian Community Membership and the Support for an Entry Visa, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 34/1: 69-77.
- JOSEPH S. 2020. Life Imitates Art: Physicians in the time of Plague *The American Journal of Medicine* Jun; 133/6: 651.
- LOTTMAN, H. R. 1979. *Albert Camus: A Biography* London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson publishers
- METZ, T. 2020. More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Philosophy: How philosophy bears on COVID-19, *S Afr J Sci.* 116, 7/8: 1.
- METZ, T. 2017. Replacing Development: An Afro-Communal Approach to Global Justice, *Philosophical Papers*, 46/1: 111-37
- PETERS, M.A. 2022. The Plague: Human Resilience and the Collective Response to Catastrophe *Educational Philosophy and Theory* Vol. 54/1: 1-4.
- ROOSSINCK M.J. 2015. Move over, bacteria! Viruses make their mark as mutualistic microbial symbionts, *J Virol.* 2015 Jul; 89/13: 6532-35
- SHAKIR, F. 2020. Albert Camus' *The Plague* in Twenty-First Century's Pandemic Covid-19: A Reification Model in the Capitalistic World, *Linguistics and Literature Review* 6/2: 47- 58.
- SIMON C. Estok 2021. Camus, Roth, Covid-19: The dangers of forgetting, *Neohelicon*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-021-00607-9>
- TALLIS, R. 2020. "Philosophy in the Time of Plague, Part 2" *Philosophy Now Online Magazine Issue 139* [https://philosophynow.org/issues/139/Philosophy\\_in\\_the\\_Time\\_of\\_Plague\\_Part\\_2](https://philosophynow.org/issues/139/Philosophy_in_the_Time_of_Plague_Part_2)
- VELAZQUEZ, G. L. 2020. The role of Philosophy in the Pandemic Era, *Bioethics Update*. July-December, 2020; 6[2]: 92-100.
- WRIGHT, N.T., 2020. Christianity offers no answers about the corona virus. It's not supposed to, *Time*, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>. viewed 26 December 2021.