



## Negotiating Choice in the Post Covid Era: An Existential Reading

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### Abstract

This paper probes into three phenomena of day to day life that have been radically altered in the wake of the COVID 19 crisis. These are space, visibility, and interaction. While physical/social distancing has forced the human individual into solitary forced confinement, the absence of tangible society opens up scope for self-reflection. While the exposure to the material world is reduced, the widening reach of digital modes has led to the creation of an alter reality. The human situation has witnessed an unprecedented existential challenge with no prefixed maps of response. A fine balance between meditative inaction and prudent action can serve as a solution. Individual goodwill needs to feed into collective goodwill to open up the social space for positive interaction. Positive psychology based on existential underpinnings of the human psyche creates new ways of understanding the lasting purposes of human life. In this paper, I contend that a shift from the extrinsic to intrinsic self-improvement can play a key role in the evolution of a new society which would be inevitable in the post-corona age. The authentic choice in this regard is not to be understood as one of rebellion as was taken to be the soul purport in the past. This choice is to have a shared nature. Digital presence and togetherness need to be ensured both on the personal and the social level. This paper studies metropolitan life to point out the limits/restrictions on spaces that were accessible and the price of screen visibility. Is there an existential yearning beyond the screen? Does the screen as a medium demand a kind of inauthenticity? Can we learn to un-pose for the camera in the corona age?

### Keywords

existential, digital, covid19, authenticity

## **Grappling with the Thrownness**

As an opening remark I would like to point out that we have entered a postmodern world which has forced upon us the ills of the modern ways of living – one of the gruesome manifestations of which is the Covid 19 pandemic. It would be erroneous to look at the situation in terms of an unprecedented calamity. On the contrary – this pandemic is a cumulative effect of years of negligence on part of the human race. The hangover of the audacious myth of human supremacy on planet earth which was the idea that was at the core of post enlightenment modernity is now in tatters. One recalls the prophetic statement by Mahatma Gandhi “The world has enough for everyone’s need but not enough for everyone’s greed.” Modern society overinvested itself in a culture of consumerism which has proven utterly counterproductive. The most wretched consequence of such a society has been that we have become a society of hollow symbolisms. It is the semblance to the real that has become more important than the real itself. This is the reason why we see most of the modern nations falling for symbolisms on a political level. This scenario is replicated not only in rapidly modernizing developing nations like India but also in the cradle of material development, the United States of America. The promise to bring back the lost old great America based on a utilitarian and promising capitalism is as blinding of the reality as the vision of modernity which sees progress only in terms of material advancements. Capitalism establishes a culture of heard morality and the promise of progress perpetuates it. The same criticism applies to Marxism from an existential viewpoint. The belief that any fixed ideology will solve the problems of humanity is a vague utopia. The current coronavirus crisis is a reminder that these absolute ideologies have failed mankind. The call of the hour is to realize that the problems have to be dealt with on a case to case basis. Residents of metropolitan cities in this crisis are examples of individual survivors in the face of indifferent, indiscriminate nature. While a lot of people are reading the pandemic as a conflict between the pandemic and the living nature, my suggestion is that nature is at most only biologically active. Nature has not yet developed intentionality – the behavioural inclination to react in the future to respective causes. The reality contrary to the man/nature dichotomy which has so pervasively taken hold of social media platforms is that nature is indifferent to man. This pandemic is yet another reminder (undoubtedly the largest) of the homosapiens’ insignificance. This is clearly visible in the way the erstwhile ‘public spaces’ are occupied today. The notion of privilege has changed in the corona age. It is those who are on the roads that are facing the fear of an imminent death. They are leading an existentially charged life – the one with an authentic choice. The affluent upper middle class bourgeois individual has the privilege to stay within the confines of his/her maintained home. Unemployment has now become a choice that reflects privilege. However, I would refrain from bashing the entire professional middle class as doctors are playing a pivotal part in saving the lives of patients in the current hotbed of Corona – Mumbai and other metro

cities across the country.<sup>1</sup> The motivational factor for such a choice however is clearly way beyond the lust for wealth. It is the drive to create a meaning out of their professional beingness that has caused them to choose service of the people. The question that arises then is the following: Who has access to these medical facilities? In an overpopulated Indian setting with a burdened and rapidly depleting public healthcare apparatus, it is the private hospitals that would play a major role in the way the country goes about handling the pandemic. The dichotomy here is that capital or a rat race mentality (the modern form of herd mentality) cannot be useful for solving a problem that has such cataclysmic and apparently irreversible impacts on the way daily life is negotiated. The fallout of the American healthcare system is a clear example of the failure of capitalism to address this global concern.<sup>2</sup> Thus space is highly contested in these urban settings. Whether it be space in mass isolation centres or on hospital beds. The material world has reached a kind of decadence where the meaning of growth, success, safety – the very core of life is challenged. For instance, let us look at the contradiction between two institutional elements of society – religion and marriage and the novel coronavirus. In a sense this pandemic has changed the way organized religions operate. The Christian God is accessible virtually while the Hindu Gods and Goddesses have relegated to the state of the inner God, the homely *devata*. Marriages (if any) are now being organized with minimal guests. Thus, the primal instinct of humankind comes to the fore – it is the sheer will to survive with as much convenience as possible. In a sense piety has to adjust to the desire to exist failing which mass gatherings in the name of religion can lead to catastrophes that are irreparable. Death is not that metaphysical route to God in a pandemic struck world. Restrictions on family members cremating the body of their loved ones is a situation that raises questions about the way an individual thinks about death, family, and the self. It is as if we are all living on borrowed time. Calamity stays away only as long as it is to be witnessed on the screen. There is a need for people to empathize more and more with people around them. Gadgets are the safest means in this scenario. Covid 19 has transformed the screen in ways that was never thought of before. The screen is now the only gateway. It is no more just young people who are communicating with each other but people across cultures and ages. This brings up its own challenges about the nature of reality. The choices of what an individual wishes to show the world have increased and decreased at the same time. For instance, it is easier to show oneself beautiful in a photo but at the same time a text fails to emote the felt experience of the conveying subject despite the multitude of emojis available. The loss of physical proximity is a huge psychological challenge that may have pathological impacts on the individual and the society at multiple levels. This is another reason to insist that humanity is going through an existential moment in history. With every lockdown and the subsequent unlock-lock cycle, the movement patterns of people have severely been impacted. It is to be observed that people who were otherwise considered introverts and

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<sup>1</sup> My paper deals with Mumbai as the site for this study, though the ideas suggested may be relevant to several metro cities across the world. The purpose of this limitation is to be able to focus more on the relatable context.

<sup>2</sup> The recent decision of the Trump administration to pull out of the United Nations COVID 19 prevention efforts is a double failure – a capitalist betrayal of an ailing world.

less social are also being forced into a new environment. With the whole family shifting into the 'home' – spaces have to be reconfigured, appearances modified and everything from food to clothing need to adjust to the new normal. There is a fear of the gender norms being more forcefully implemented in the presence of the male gaze while the privacy of women is violated – yet another choice denied. On the contrary, the same confrontation can result in a gradual shift in the normal – a situation where women reassert their right to dress as they wish. My intent in bringing this duality out is to point out the volatility of the current situation which is poised with openness of possibilities in the individual and social realm of being. It is this uncertain openness with regard to the future that lends the pandemic its existential character. The advice of Sartre to go on choosing different projects to lead a meaningful life can make a huge difference to the psycho-somatic attitude of an individual to the pandemic. While at the same time the awareness that in choosing for one man, every individual chooses for entire humanity – a sense of responsibility is instilled firmly. This is of special significance when people may feel at a distance from the harsh reality as it is only narrated on the screen. The negotiation of the screen space is essential in these difficult times. How is the self to be negotiated in such a scenario? The virtual mode of communication has several limitations. Bodily presence is a vital part in personal social behaviour. This lack can create a situation of individual alienation leading to serious consequences like a mental breakdown and depression. Social interaction is to be reconfigured to adapt to this situation. It is in this sense that the camera has taken a frontline space. It has become the soul medium of interaction with the outside world. This is even more strikingly felt in the case of people who are isolated in Covid wards. The challenge is now not to appear different but as it is. I would like to refer to this necessity as the pressing need for focal realism. The call of the moment is to use the screen authentically. One instance that has to be noted in this regard is the increasing number of masked selfies that people are sharing on social media. However, this tendency itself has not been untouched by the crazy desire of being 'noticed'. It is in this way that the act becomes more important than the purpose it carries. This creates the kind of detached sense that prepares the ground for an existential angst – a kind of defamiliarization with the pressing reality at hand. The notion of unposing that I have looked at is a way to become more real in our interactions with the outside world. The pandemic has laid bare the abilities/inabilities of us all. It is a perfect time for letting go of our acquired beings, the assumed roles and to invest oneself in self-discovery. It is to be noted however that this chance for self-change is a privilege not available to everyone. The lives of sanitation workers, healthcare professionals and domestic help (who are predominantly woman) are under a harsher grip of the prevailing catastrophe. Women and people from the trans community are at maximum disadvantage. These are not the people taking to the screens in our day to day virtual communication. The rest of the paper aims to discuss the solutions to this condition of thrownness and an attempt will be made to gaze at the way the post Covid world has to be imagined.

### **Authenticity in Absurdity: Hoping For Sisyphus**

The current pandemic has made a Sisyphus of us all. The reference here is to the famous philosophical piece of Albert Camus titled *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The irony however is that it is now utterly difficult to imagine Sisyphus happy except by a blatant denial of reality which has already proven counterproductive in Italy and the United States of America. The current situation is one which has the potential to pose as an existential threat to the human race. There is however a differential impact of the apparently indiscriminate virus. This difference is structured alongside the socio-economic factors that determine the situatedness of the human subject. This difference is ironically more brutally visible in metropolitan cities which have developed along capitalist lines widening the economic disparities. These disparities do not end here. They reflect and magnify the troubles in other facets of life. The question of access is pivotal here. At the same time, it is a curious fact that the notion of the poor and hence dirty carrying a contagious disease is easily accepted. The normative is itself subversive to the sense of individual dignity of the poor people. It is necessary to realize that such discriminatory approach reifies the individual and creates a situation where people experience a sense of collective isolation. The Indian Social System is different from the European or the North American. Modernity interacted with different societies in different ways. It is important that these alternative modernities are understood correctly in order to understand their relation to a pandemic like Covid 19. Low and middle income groups from these locations are at maximum threat of bearing the brunt of the crisis as they do not have the economic leverage to work from home or not work at all. Thus, in more ways than one, these groups of the population are deprived of a choice. The status quo appears stark naked where high ranking officers can work from the safety and comfort of their homes while those lower in the corporate/public sector work ladder are forced to reach their office premises. The situation of the banking staff and officials both in the public and private sector are a case in point. The question that emerges is that how far is it justified to limit individual liberty in the guise of the service of the nation during and post the Covid 19 era? Are people sharing the risk equally? My answer to this question is that the risk sharing has been along the lines of the distribution and appropriation of capital and other resources in the society. Thus, those people who do not have a cushy life are in fact the once who are forced to bear the brunt right from initial exposure to the virus to lesser chances of a swift recovery post contact with the virus. This is clearly an existentially precarious condition as these people are left with little authentic choice within their scope except to give in to the ordeal of the deadly disease which hastens the sense of an impending death in the looming making the pandemic an affair of angst. The problems do not end here. The stigma that is attached to this viral disease in the social circles creates a situation of shame and may lead to self-incarceration and a rapidly declining sense of self-worth. The Indian medical system and the life of the metros are economically and socially ill equipped to cope with these shortcomings that will be a clear after effect. We will now look at some of the solutions to come to terms with the trouble at hand. On an individual level, the struggle must shift towards a collective responsibility for response in the face of disaster. This response should be

based on the experiential instances that survivors and corona warriors narrate. A medical emergency is a clear call to the people to come out of the accepted moulds of society and behave in nonconformist existentially authentic ways that are focused on creating an ecosystem of self-care and thus societal care.

The pivotal existential drives of touch and sex may also be defined in unforeseen ways post the pandemic. The dynamics of physical proximity have already taken a jolt creating a sense of crisis in culturally accepted norms as precautionary measures have been reinforced by norms of zero contact violating the established ways of greeting and comforting. In more ways than one, the virus has crossed the public space and interfered into the private space of the individuals. The normative is clearly ousted as the time is out of joint. Humans may have to re-conceive the notions of love and endearment in ways that would have to be wary of satisfactory physical contact.

This paper is an appeal to the populace at large to reconsider the ways of life that have been accepted as the ideal. These changes better be voluntary in order to defend against the human propensity to return to the repetitive and the comfortable. There is a need of acknowledging the fact that man is an animal in transaction with indifferent forces in nature and the price of an arrogant denial of this recurrent truth may be harsher than the currently raging pandemic. In order to achieve these individuals need to try and evolve a new world, new space and resource sharing paradigms and more inclusive ways to survive in nature.