

ETHICS AND PESTILENCE

Discerning the Greater Common Good and Mutual Reciprocity

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Abstract: This article explores the question of ethics in times of pestilence as during Covid-19, via the ideas of Simon Blackburn, Jean Paul Sartre, and Henry Louis Gates Jr; it employs the representational notions of Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall as ways of seeing, so as to map and evaluate Biblical-Hebrew Exodus stories in relation to the current Covid-19 pandemic. This exploration also attempts to respond principally to the questions: *what then is the place of the greater common good as ethic in the current experience? And what kind of ethics could be delivered in such a context?* The article simultaneously argues that there is a close similarity between the Egyptian plague experience and the current pestilence, and that social action based on the ethics of common good and bio-centric mutual reciprocity are adequate responses for restoring current society to its ethical orientation and practice. In its conclusion, the article points to ideas that make transparent the article's significance.

Keywords: Ethics, Good, Morality Evolution, Reciprocity, Species-centricity.

1. Introduction

There is apparently some consensus that *ethics* as both thought and practice are different from morality, although ethics by its nature draws extensively from the moral compass guaranteed by individual and society. The distance between moral or legislated law and ethical appropriacy is often large; and so, the search for *the greater common good* (Blackburn 80) becomes a contemporary ethical project. Delicately nuanced, such ethics underscores an

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accompanying sense of justice and equality, deeply rooted in freedom and liberty for all. It is driven by *doing good as right than wrong* (6) for the progress of humankind and the advancement of society. Morality, however, is quite the opposite; most agree, it is deeply personal, not always egalitarian, and grounded in principles cherished individually. Legal codes, though different, are prescriptive, justified more by precedent custom than reason. Murder is punishable but capital punishment, wherever it exists, is legal. Hence, laws are often responsibilities individuals follow rather than principles society enacts. However, every serious intellectual exploration, conflates morality and law with ethics, although each differs from the other ideationally and programmatically.

Pestilence (Fauci xix-xx) ravages human societies to their death. In one's experience, today with the innumerable fears surrounding the pandemic, humans individualise, opting for social distancing and medical isolation in order to prevent the deadly contagion from diseasing more people. Living as against life itself is severely tested here and now. If individualism emphasises personal safety and shapes good health in the new normal, the collective common good as idea will become unnecessary. So, what then is the place and position of the greater common good as ethic in current experience? When pestilence terrorises, what kind of ethics could be delivered in such a context?

I wish to explore these two central questions above, via (a) the ethics-morality complication, and (b) Biblical-Exodus narratives, and their implications in pestilence. I will also comment by way of conclusion on the emergent ethical problematics in the new normal.

2. Mapping the Ethics-Morality Complication

The ethics-morality complication is both a problematic and a polemic. To map the complication and to comprehend and engage its complexities, I use select ideas from Simon Blackburn on the ethics-morality question, Jean Paul Sartre's ideas on ethical living, and Henry Louis Gates Jr's arguments on ethics

for the exploration. For analytic lenses, I choose Gayatri Spivak's and Stuart Hall's perspectives on critique as representation

I argue alongside Simon Blackburn that there are two major universal principles that shape the ethical consciousness of today's human society. One is humanity's quest for the *greater common good*, (76) and the other is *natural reciprocity* (34). In his lucid and incisive book, titled *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, Blackburn argues that an "ethical climate"(3) is born from "the climate of ideas" (1) which the "consciousness" (1) of people worldwide, develop from "the stand" one takes on behalf of the *other* (1). Simply put, ethics is what one thinks about and does for the disempowered and marginalised in society. Doing *good is right* and ethical, like in the personal-moral. But morality is rule-bound because of either esoteric religious (17) sensibilities or prescriptive atheistic attitudes (17). Besides, there is enforced cultural ideology (44). The ethical endeavour, though not moralist, seeks, however, to comprehend how the "network of rules and norms" (6) embedded in morality, can "sustain ... lives" (6). The ethical consciousness, despite all, chooses the idea of *the greater common good*, despite its utilitarian origins (76), to redefine a dynamic humanism, as against the "absolute authority" (17) of individual morality. If ethics degenerate into absolutism, then it will produce moral intransigence, giving rise to tyrannical power and control. Though ethics are meta-thought and inevitably universal, it opts to combine with the contextual as well. The universal must, however, owe to the contextual because the former otherwise can become objectivist. Indeed, ethics can aim at the common good, only when it selects *the other* to speak for. This then is the problematic, the inter-relations between the universal and the specific, that one must engage in through the three threats rising from the ethics-moral complication.

What threatens dynamic ethical practice, as Blackburn suggests, are "relativism" (17), "evolutionary theories" (33), and "false consciousness" (44). Relativism resists the hegemony of a single "truth" (17). It promotes many truths and though not false, permits by implication an *anything-goes philosophy*.

Arguably, relativism is about a culture-specific “way of seeing” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 34), an epistemological inevitability, that tends to treat even systemic cruelties as cultural difference. For example, the right to ethnic dressing in a multi-cultural context is an ethical expectation but female genital mutilation, because it is African custom, is not (Blackburn 21). Racism, xenophobia, casteism, homophobia, middle class morality, and the like—all, despite their culture-specific arguments, are unethical. But paradoxically cultural resistance against all the above is also contextual and culture-specific.

For purposeful ethical practice, one must resist singular “subjectivism” (Blackburn 25); but reconcile relativist contextualism with universal good. One requires to re-inscribe the right “to life, liberty and security” (21-22), as ethical action that facilitates equality (22) and dignity (21), against “discrimination” (23) everywhere; that should bulwark all society against servitude and slavery (22). Local authenticity cannot compromise universal human rights. That, then is the infamous rub: universal ethics need not subordinate context-centred culture-specific emancipatory action. It only must imagine substantial “polyglossia” (Bakhtin 50) – a multi-valency of meanings—of ethical principles based on the good of humankind and the incontrovertibility of individual cultural liberties. Therefore, individual and/or collective social prejudice, based on colour, race, religion, sex, and language, as Blackburn implies, (21-23) would destroy the social potential for the greater common good. So, the common good cannot be achieved without equality, justice, and freedom for all.

While, not giving into “a grand unifying pessimism” (29) that assumes a leviathan of primordial and evil rogues, one must nevertheless imagine, as Blackburn argues, a “grand unifying theory of human nature” (29) which shapes the macro-system of humanist values, based on freedom and equality, which in turn mobilises ethical consciousness and practice. In so doing, one rejects an alienating objectivist ethical order, and promotes polyglossic ethical delivery. Consequently, ethical thought and action could combine meaningfully with generic humanist

values and context-specific worldviews in a productive and progressive Bakhtinian "dialogical" imaginary (Bakhtin 45), i.e., an interanimated sensibility of the general and the particular. This congruence between common good and contextual diversity would clarify the relativist paradox as a terrain of differentiated ethics than a conflated one.

The next challenge in the ethical debate is on how the science of evolution is employed in the debates between religionists and scientists over the selfish gene argument. While some scientists argue that in the evolutionary cycle there is no love, compassion or concern, that every behaviour is "programmed" (Blackburn 33) to propagate one's "genes", others argue for some "altruism" (33) in genetic adaptation and survival (34). Nobody can explain "mother-love" among some animals (34); or why certain species mates deliberately with the weakest, without being guaranteed either survival or propagation (37). The case in point is a certain species of elks (37). Often sexual behaviours among species differ, proffering a place for more than just species propagation. (35). Perhaps it is love! One may never know.

There are, arguably, evolutionary oddities (37) here, where obviate genetic reciprocity (34), without any basis in genetic propagation appears, upturning the much-valorised selfish gene theory (37). Standard evolutionary theories do not work here; instead a scientific-evolutionary theory of mutuality stands true. What is visible then here is *natural and mutual reciprocity*, which is also the second ethical paradigm for human societies.

Then, evolution lives in the imaginativeness of the minds, the "psychology", (37) of every species. There is not just species propagation, adaptation, and selection but also some genetic altruism on the lines of "you-scratch-my-back-and-I'll scratch-yours" principle (33) in nature because of the tenuousness of genetic survival and the resilience of human imaginativeness; for otherwise human and other species must accept "the war of all against all" (38). Consequently, in nature, survival is reciprocal; that is why wolves never hunt alone "for the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack" (Kipling 29). Moreover, as Blackburn insists, "human beings are

ethical animals" (Blackburn⁴) and hence altruism and reciprocity are real in human societies, despite arguments over selfish gene-pools. So then, is there a so-called altruistic gene that multiplies? Or is genetics by its very nature generous? One can never know scientifically. But since human beings prevent fighting and cruelty against each other, only to live in *mutual reciprocity*, there possibly is. They will quest after an ethically humane society invested in the common good of all, while being ambitious of love, liberty, and justice.

Finally, "false consciousness" (44) threatens ethical societies: Marx called it ideology (Marx 36-37). It is about representation: if one employs highly prejudiced, moralistic criticism, often subjective in nature against ethical societies, that would be false consciousness, a fake ethical sensibility. If otherwise, one performs a persuasive critique of current material and ethical conditions on behalf of marginalised people (Blackburn 45-48), one would represent the common good indeed. Critique, then, is a radical manner of seeing the nature and practice of ethics.

The above ideational geography concerning the greater common good and natural reciprocity with all their associated values of justice, equality, and altruism, rejigs Jean Paul Sartre's perspectives on ethics in his *Notebooks on Ethics* (1983/1992), published posthumously. I point here to Sartre's two unburished certainly yet unfinished ethical notions, namely i) "revolutionary socialist ethics (13) and ii) "freedom" (9). The former obviously is a product of its times, and against anything remotely right-wing, but needs to be redefined by the latter, to substantiate a greater common good for all. As argument, Sartre deploys "intersubjectivity" which makes transparent the "in-itself" and "for-itself" (14) philosophical notions, reminiscent of Derrida's theorisation of "absence" and "presence" (Derrida 279-280). For Sartre, "in-itself" (6) is a condition of being, negated by the possibility of absence, as the phenomenologists infer. That is, any selfhood, subjectivity, becomes conscious by its erasure: i.e. only when it includes the Other (Spivak 66) or its split-self (Bretens 163), meaning only when it becomes "for-itself", and hence, with the emergence of presence (Derrida 279). Simply

understood, no self can live outside the other, while the other always includes the self. This implies freeing the subject *in-itself* to locate the other, becoming *for-itself*, a means to freedom and "liberty" (Sartre 56). Simply speaking, freeing human selfhood from *its* own power entails speaking *for* the *other*. Accordingly, socialist ethics include freedom and liberty for others. Sartre obviously suggests that inter-subjectivity, the universal and individual interface, embedded in social freedom and liberty ultimately develops the greater common good.

Beyond Sartre's perspectives, Henry Louis Gates Jr, African American critic, pitches "humanism" (44), against the "all-too-easy alibi of moral isolation" (47). Just because one is culture-centric, one cannot "recuse" (46) from the "tragic conflicts that embroil communities of different faiths" (46). He sees "individual liberty" (46) only thriving with shared plurality (48). Gates Jr's views resonate with other thinkers' ideas of equality and justice, while inevitably grist to questions of freedom against the racially discriminated. Gates Jr argues that, "none of us is free until each of us is free, and all in this society-white and black, Protestant and Catholic, Jew and Gentile and Muslim, gay and straight, rich and poor-are brothers and sisters" (53). Gates Jr employs King Jr's "Credo" (Gates Jr 47) to establish the primary principles of multi-cultural brotherhood/sisterhood; he also substantiates how only an ethical consciousness, driven by justice and equality, can achieve the greater common good of all.

In this exploration so far, the greater common good and natural reciprocity have been configured as humanist ethics in thought and practice; what follows from here will explain how *critique as representation* functions as analytical lenses to posit the notion of the greater common good. Sartre avers that critique as method, is about the "question of being moral" (Sartre 1). Gayatri Spivak suggests that representation carries two meanings: i) the playing out of ideas as "philosophy" (70) and ii) "the standing for" (70) in politics. In her "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1998), these two meanings are inter-related but not conjoined (70). What resonates with our analysis, is that the second meaning, particularly, is about committed persuasion,

not just expository rhetoric (70) like the first. While both may appear to “run together” (70) like other philosophers suggest the second mediates between “concrete experience of the oppressed” (69) and the generic nature of oppression itself, thus promoting “transformative” consciousness (72). Such persuasion enables *critiquing* global forms of marginalisation, and peripheralisation (67), for the upliftment of the marginalised. Only then, can the greater good be achieved for all humankind.

Stuart Hall later expands Spivak’s notion of representation and critique, in his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1989). Hall speaks of representation as containing two major features: i) “*enunciation*” (222) and ii) *positioning* (226). The “I” (222) that *enunciates*, shares common values and experiences but the “I” (222) as subject, positions ethnic or cultural difference. When cross-bred, it challenges “dominant regimes of representation” (225). This article’s argument resonates with how Hall considers cultural representation as critique of absolute authoritarianism and power. Hall’s arguments about representation overlaps with Sartre’s ideas of intersubjectivity and Spivak’s idea of speaking-for-marginality. Therefore, in ethics, critique invokes principles of justice and equality for the common good.

Ethics, then, contests rigid moral codes. The ethical consciousness mobilises equal and just social action for the benefit of all. Ethical habits fight against discrimination, interrogating power and the powerful through empowered critique for the greater common good. I wish to map below how such ethics pan out in the material context of pestilence via different narratives in the next section.

3. Pestilence and *Exodus* Narratives

There are many instances of pestilence that the Biblical texts enumerate. Some of them carry no historicity (Moore and Kelle 81) but remain allegorical leitmotifs of human suffering and God’s absolutist power. These stories may be religious and cultic re-tellings of actual events, but their cultural memory loads them with allegorical signification about Jewish subjugation, exile, and liberation. Credited to Moses, the Pentateuch (Neusner 57), in

which the *Exodus* appears, is exilic memory from Babylonian captivity; here Yahweh, the God of Israel, is presented as intervening and imposing plague and pestilence on their Egyptian oppressors in order to deliver them from the Pharaohs and Egypt to be led to their Promised Land.

In the Mosaic books, the Hebrew people fear three material experiences: a) invasion, b) famine, and c) pestilence—the last of which as both phenomenon and motif deserve analysis here. But there are many stories, both scriptural and otherwise, and because of their remarkable differences they beg repetition here. In the primary scriptural Hebrew tale Moses and Aaron have to plead with the Pharaoh, for permission to offer their God “a sacrifice” “three days journey” away in the “wilderness” (Exodus 5:3). Otherwise, their God may visit pestilence (Exodus 5:3) upon them, for their betrayal and disinterest. Notice: the pestilence is for the Hebrews, who fail to sacrifice unto their God, not for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In fear of pestilence, the Hebrews make their plea, the rejection of which reverses God’s wrath. Hence the nine plagues—plus one—symbolise both fear and retribution for Hebrew and Egyptian, respectively. The Hebrew scriptures unpack a cultural allegory that pitchforks the Egyptians as oppressors against Hebrews as victims; and the leitmotif that stitches them together is pestilence, because it represents radical intervention of the Hebrew God on behalf of His people. The last plague however has a different tropology: it depicts a more imminent intervention of God, and its palimpsest rewrites the future Christian doctrine of Jesus’s incarnation.

By and large, the Exodus plagues are predominantly diseases caused by an extra-ordinary act of nature. In its mytho-historical (Bacigalupo 3) terms, it is perceived as supernatural, even magical-miraculous, intervention, mediated by the Hebrew God, for the deliverance of His subjugated community. This diseasing is against the Egyptian community, for their absolutist enslaving tendencies. By implication, according to the Hebrew sources, the Egyptians are vile and vicious people who subjugate but pay miserably for their unethical practice of slavery when the Hebrew God’s wrath devastates them. The Hebrew God

indulges his people because they cry out for his succour and his liberation. This narrative wraps the godhead in an acute self-contradiction: for the Egyptians, he is pestilence, for the Hebrews, freedom. The monotheistic God is both pestilence and deliverance at once.

This leitmotif of disease coupled with liberation complicates the figure of the godhead—remember, the Hebrews are freed from enslavement because of pestilence. For, despite suspect historicity (Moore and Kelle 81-82), the plagues in Hebrew scriptures loop in “land-promise” (191-192) to the literary-allegory of “allochthonous” travel (Schmid 188), thus serving Hebrew identity with the liberation imaginary. In this argument then, pestilence is the emblematic site on which ironically both reverse subjugation and deliverance happens. The deliverance, in this context, celebrated by the Hebrew Passover, seems beholden on pestilence: the fear of it among the Hebrews and the torture of it for the Egyptians. The suffering among the Egyptians is tormenting punishment indeed, and their might and power laid low by divine intervention. The final magical-miracle recalls first-born sacrifice, a ritual, post-Abrahamic faiths desist. Yet the Egyptians suffer it, this time, as pestilence. But the final redemption-liberation arrives indeed in the literal and metaphoric crossing-over at the Red Sea for the Hebrew-Israelite people, as the hand of God delivers them. Once again pestilence as torture and its consequences of devastation and death continue to haunt the Hebraic texts perennially.

The pestilence-liberation problematic embedded in this cultural allegory raises ethical issues: Yahweh is not egalitarian but prejudiced, jealously affirming his own. But he does not spare the Hebrew-Israelites either; he continues to visit pestilence and plague on the Hebrews for rebellion (Numbers 16:41-60) and sin (25:1-9). Many times, in their wandering in the desert, they suffer leprosy, plague, and other illnesses. When Miriam questions God’s prophet (12:1-15), she is smitten by leprosy; when Israelites intermix with the women of Moab (25:1-9), the ethnocentric-godhead again sends plagues upon them, for their impurity. Thus, pestilence as symbol and

leitmotif remains central to the liberatory imaginary. Post-Miriam and after Moab, Yahweh becomes even more jealous, not necessarily fair and just, but effectively visiting Israelites many times over with pestilence as punishment. No ethical justice, only bland tyranny here! Thus, fresh ethical issues arise from the Hebraic narratives. Somehow the Hebrew God is vengeful and petulant, though only to re-build and restore. Yet every moment in those times of pestilence is trial by fire. Symbolically, it is terrifying purgation and torturous cleansing indeed. Ethically, even supernaturally, such violence inspires more fear than love; it is more judgemental than benevolent. From a non-theistic, perhaps secular perspective, common good is achieved only at great human cost. No mutual reciprocity here at all!

Many scholars refigure this pestilence-liberation complication by simply shifting epistemic lenses, to re-tell the Hebrew stories from Egyptian perspectives. There are two at least that deserve outlining. One is Josephus's and the other is Tacitus's. In Josephus' fuller reportage, which re-tells Manetho double-version of the Hebrew Exodus story, "the Jews appear as villains, rather than victims" (Gruen 198). Egypt is ruled by a Pharaoh, of "uncertain date", who desiring to see his god in person, rids his land of "lepers" and the "polluted", containing them in his "quarries" where their numbers multiply. The "afflicted" appoint "Moses" as leader, who legislates laws. The Hebrews revolt with help from a neighbouring shepherd-clan, driving Pharaoh for thirteen years into exile in Ethiopia. The usurpers "with their allies" sack cities, abominate temples, pillage "sanctuaries" and "persecute" priests. The exiled Pharaoh's son finally avenges his father "driving" the conquerors "out of Egypt" to the "borders of Syria" (Gruen 213). An "inverted Exodus" (214), but disease and pestilence preoccupy this imaginary, as well. Here, contradictorily, the Egyptians are victimised, shifting the leitmotif of pestilence onto the Hebrews, while the archetypes of liberation are Egyptian. Suffering, however, is eternal either way. The godhead remains vengeful. Hence ethically, there is a long cycle of violence, except here it is endured by the antagonists of the Hebrew narratives. If

mytho-histories, Egyptian or Hebraic, carry stories of pestilence and its attendant motifs, any godhead's justice is ideologically, not ethically driven. For the godhead makes whoever is *not* on its side suffer! There is no article of good faith here; hence justice is flawed.

The later Tacitus's tale differs. A plague infects Egypt and ravages the people's "bodies" (225); the Pharaoh "banishes" the Hebrews "reckoned as hateful to the gods" (225) causing the rampant pandemic; the Hebrews are obliged to sojourn in the "desert" (Gruen 225) ; Moses, the prophet-figure, inspires them; they conquer new lands and set up a city and a temple (226).

Many other stories precede and follow Josephus and Tacitus, but ethical questions arise from the allegory, not of liberation, but of pestilence. In the early first century, Lysimachus, Graeco-Egyptian historian and therefore, sympathetic to Egypt, depicts Moses as an Egyptian. The Jews are already diseased with "leprosy, scurry" (201) and other pestilences; they escape into Egyptian temples resulting in their disease desecrating Egyptian gods; famine arrives as punishment on Egypt and the gods through oracles advise purging the temples. The Pharaoh drives the desecrators to the sea, cleansing Egypt; some Hebrews escape, and Moses, the dissenting Egyptian, orders them to violate every Egyptian image or place of god. The Jews then conquer neighbouring lands, slandering, and persecuting the inhabitants, while setting up their temple and city (201). This tale, though heavily anti-Israelite-Hebrew is instructive, however, for the recurring pestilence motif. The Egyptian version yet contends that pestilence is brought by Israelites, not unlike the Hebrew story. The only difference is that the Hebrews are the contagion there literally, while in the Hebrew narrative they bring it on metaphorically. But pestilence persists, allegorically.

For Strabo, the earliest of historians, by contrast, Moses is Egyptian but a dissenter who teaches people about the "all-encompassing God" (200), as living in spirit and not in stone-icons. He collects a substantial following who later become the Jewish nation beyond the sea. What remains striking is the

absence of the pestilence narrative, but this story lives only in world of historians, scholars, and academics. The more popular narratives are the Josephus and Tacitus tales recurrently re-told in many forms. (200-201).

Historians and thinkers, however, in keeping with popular expectation, forge the figure of the jealous godhead either for Hebrew or Egyptian wrongdoing. Just shuffling pestilence motifs on behalf of or against Egyptians/Hebrews, does not resolve the ethical question. Every godhead is reproachable ethically depending on which story is re-told. Arguably, pestilence, even from God, is ethically reprehensible. That indeed is the ethical problematic. It is also the problem of textual representation, the way of seeing, the recurrent epistemic shifts in ethical thought and spirituality

The Exodus stories and their counter-narratives are "a myth about past and future"; it is about freedom for "doing good" (De Troyer 92) and "being righteous" (93) while "doing bad" (90) and "oppressing" (90) people invite disease and death. Historically, even when Egyptian stories are recast as Hebrew Scriptures (Gruen 227), their "complex of motifs" (Hallo 50) invokes ethical visions for the greater common good. Otherwise, God's sign is mere pestilence indeed.

For scientists, the pestilence story is fascinating biology. Science uses "volcanic eruption", "red-algae" overgrowth and "climate-change" theories (Waxman 2020) to explain how and why the exodus plagues occurred. Serialised natural disaster theories, based on cause-and-effect, cascade through escaped ash, turning Nile red, and causing all the plagues except first-born deaths. Strong evidence including an "ancient papyrus" listing "physiochemical activity (Tervisanato 811), "acidifying agents" and volcanic "sulfates" (813), enlists approval.

A 2008 Yale Journal article schematises the bio-medical and ecological implications of ancient Egypt's pestilence more rationally (Ehrenkranz and Sampson 31), depicting "climate change" as central to the primary six plagues (33); and "springtime storms" and "violent winds" (36) for the next four. The last plague attacks the "non-immune younger Egyptians"

(36) while the older survive. Nature is simply upside-down. Hence scientists argue that the evidence about ancient Egypt's pestilence points to, "...a unifying theory of inter-relation of a single atmospheric event with a series of unreasonable climatic changes causing all calamities" (39).

4. Living in Times of Pestilence: Covid-19 and Its Impacts

The current pandemic caused by a *mutant unalive organism* Covid-19, is simultaneously an evolutionary success story and human-driven ecological disaster.¹ Covid-19 has infected, as I write, over 7 million people worldwide, killing 400 thousand. Permit me pause, to repeat here Covid-19's uncanny resemblances with ancient near-eastern pestilence then. Notice: bats and pangolins, genetically shuffling, and slipping through wet seafood markets, just like frogs, insects, vermin, infecting livestock and jumping to firstborns in Egypt; quarantines, lockdowns and containment zones like leper colonies, and "treasure cities" (Ehrenkranz and Sampson 35) in Egypt; and unmissably, large-scale reverse migration now, paralleling Hebrew exilic struggles. The keyword is "epizootic" (Ehrenkranz and Sampson 35), i.e., from animal. Between natural catastrophe and humanitarian crisis, pestilence has caused and causes ethical breakdown.

Between beliefs and ecology, varied ethical questions arise: limitless power, human greed, and desire, dominating humanity and the biosphere. It makes transparent anthropocentric habits of habitat encroachment, resource over-consumption, and species-exploitation. Imprisoning slave-people then and exploiting migrant labour now, constructing oversized tombs and developing monstrous urban jungles, and exploiting natural waters, the Nile then and wild-life now—all burgeon into a

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fearful site of civil-political strife and environmental disaster. That historical moment shares profoundly with the current tendencies of macro-exploitation between people and nature. Consequently, past enslaving or even subtler exploitative power now, and ecological over-use, then and now, break down *natural reciprocity*.

Any pestilence even today results in discriminatory conditions: hoarding privileged classes vs the struggling masses; frontline health workers vs irresponsible social leadership; wearied migrant walkers vs insensitive citizenship—all raise ethical questions about society's purposes and principles. By contrast, the frontline which covers civil society groups, in collaboration with health-care givers, administrators, and government serve the economically and socially marginalised communities, thereby moving towards the ethical ideal of greater common good. In the current pandemic, while the medical struggle with the disease continues, socially, the battle-lines between the privileged few, who dominate both society and nature, and the dominated many, who suffer starvation and disease, have been drawn within the social dialectics of power and marginality. For everyone now, the pandemic unfolds unjust power equations, both among human beings and between species which can only be resolved by ethical consciousness and practice. Going with the flow is not just fallacious but disastrous. It also smacks of uncaring and insensitivity, which neither represents the greater common good nor serves natural reciprocity

The dominant consequences of the current pandemic have been threefold: i) the literal struggle with illness and its life-threatening implications; Covid-19 recoveries, while large, do leave behind trail of other diseases; the pestilence's prognosis is actually a diseased future. Ethically it exposes the failure of the international health system, which has monetised everything at the cost of human lives; ii) the selfishness of human societies in hoarding essential commodities and abandoning people; it is anti-community and certainly not reciprocal; and iii) the economic breakdown leading to the miserable humanitarian

crisis, as specifically migrant labour in the Indian subcontinent walks into poverty and death, exposing a failed society's insolence over the greater common good for all.

Ethically, however, there are two significant responses currently, which mediate the archetypal alternative humanism, a radical, non-dominant, approach to the current condition: the first comes with the non-formal coming together of St Joseph's institutions and their alumni, XLRI alumni, civil society groups, the NGO, Diyaghar, Azim Premji foundation, and volunteers who organised and continue to support the marginalised communities in and around Bengaluru. Their principal orientation is *re-purposing* their service to collecting, packing, and distributing food-kits to social and economic victims of Covid-19. Known as "Karuna Warriors" they have reached over one hundred thousand marginalised families (and still counting). This massive effort points to certain ethical ideals: they are *interdependence* and *communitarian-sense*—defining the greater common good. That the Karuna Warriors see themselves as interwoven and equal to the most vulnerable struggling masses provides an alternative justice in an otherwise exploitative world.²

The second response is environmental. Much of it is rather one-sided, often prejudiced. Environmentalists often mourn over how anthropocentric habits destroy the biosphere and its subtle and delicate ecology. One needs more, i.e., a persuasive critique, which is egalitarian and situates natural ecology and human culture, not one over the other, but on an equal platform. Often environmentalists simplistically reverse human culture's dominance over nature with nature's superiority over human culture. This merely complicates the ethics of both the common good and natural reciprocity and defeats the ideals of interdependence and community-sense.

²See *Karuna Warriors* <youtu.be/0Hi65aNhQQ8>; *The Second Phase of Covid lockdown Relief Work at St Joseph's College Hub Bangalore* <youtu.be/PnY4Y4KjO5c>; *Against All Odds, Jesuit Institutions. Alumni/ae Associations* <youtube.com/watch?v=fhasSvWc328&feature=youtu.be>

There are three largely fundamental environmental visions that mediate current thinking: i) the anthropocentric view that encapsulates the human "Supremacy syndrome" (Seshan 2020), i.e., human beings dominate other species, driven by exploitative economics, with its mega projects, international travel, and over-consumptive practices; ii) hierarchising nature over culture, i.e., supporting predatory natural behaviours as traditional lifestyles; and iii) the species-centric view promoting equality among all species in the biosphere. While one debunks the first option, the second is self-contradictory. Such environmentalists assume lockdowns cause ecological renewal (Seshan 2020), "fantasizing" illusionary forest returns; condemn "civilization", as diseased "leviathan", and debunk, ala Malthus, co-morbidity and high mortality (Seshan 2020). Such arguments are prejudiced error, because the earth in Covid-19 is infected; and bat and pangolin meat are traditional, not modern, Chinese food delicacies and medicine, respectively. Just a binary reversal is simply not ethical. That the current pandemic has revealed disempowering human selfishness is true; but it also unpacks an egalitarian cooperative natural reciprocity, where the host and the parasite embrace a hearty co-existence.

In our current experience, one needs heroic voices in the wilderness. Like the great prophets, the *Karuna Warriors*, and *species-centric* ecologists *by their representation as critique* callout social discrimination and anthropocentric supremacy. These prophetic souls approach the greater common good, imagining a just and free world differently, without malice but in kindness to all, irrespective of class, caste, race, and community. Cosmopolitanism like biodiversity, visualised as inclusive and egalitarian underscores *good as right* and *mutual reciprocity* as natural in the public sphere.

5. Conclusion

Focussing Biblical pestilence stories, and their close resemblances with the current pandemic foreground the limits of this exploration but also posits its specificity. Indeed, the exodus social conditions of pestilence and exile in particular share

profoundly with specifically current coronavirus deaths and migrant labour struggles. As textualized in the exodus stories, *cure* for the Egyptians and *care* for the Hebrew-Israelites as redemption and liberation respectively, overlap in current conditions too: medical care is redemption indeed but not in overcoming sin but in alleviating disease, while civil society initiatives against starvation and death liberate the marginalised. The larger implications of this article however rest on its conceptual-philosophical propositions:

First i), given the current social-natural catastrophe, one discovers *the triumph of evolution*, not in its self-centred mechanistic sense, but in *its altruistic reciprocal sense* (as earlier argued). Here there are no battles between spiritualities; one deserves the philosophical lessons that natural reciprocity offers, in order to live an alternative humanism for the greater common good. It is in this sense that nature contains its own ethical spirit, its very own spirituality.

Next ii), contradictorily, given the emerging new normal, new social mores and practices throw up an *alternative individualism*, enforced by social distancing, isolation, and quarantine, which promote an alternative subjectivism. Between natural reciprocity and the individualism cited, there lies an ethical paradox, between the personal and the common good; this contradiction, this dialectic, should be sutured into a cultural synthesis for an alternative humanism.

Lastly iii), critique as self-reflexivity would remain the ethical epistemic scanner, that prophetic, watchdog-like voice, that will stitch together the subjectivism of *natural reciprocity* and the universality of *the greater common good*. Only then can all imagine a new world of mutual reciprocity for the greater common good of all.

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