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Lucretius and Aurelius: How to Live with the Pandemic¹

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Abstract

The paper explicates and draws lessons from the philosophy of pestilence according to two ancient philosophers in the Latin West, Titus Lucretius Carus (b. 94 BCE) and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (b. 121 CE). There are three main parts. The first investigates Lucretius' account of the plague that struck Athens in the second year of the Peloponnesian War (ca. 430 BCE). The conception of pestilence, the conditions for its spread, the impact on individuals and society at large are discussed. While Lucretius was successful in providing a detailed description of the plague in Athens, his account does not offer a specific philosophical attitude on how to live with the plague. In the second part, Aurelius' views in times of pestilence, owing from his own experience of the Antonine Plague in the Roman Empire (ca. 165-180 CE) that took an estimated five million lives are pointed out. Aurelius' account of the task of philosophy during a pandemic health crisis could fill in the lacuna in Lucretius'. The third and final part makes the connection of the lessons learned from the plagues of the Ancient Greek-Roman Empire and the Covid-19 pandemic crisis that confronts the global population in the present era.

Keywords: *Lucretius, Aurelius, Covid-19, Life in a pandemic*

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The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has caught the world off-guard, devastating economic and political systems. Also, it slowed down people's movement, challenged their beliefs and priorities, and took countless lives. As the global health crisis continues to bring havoc on all sectors of society, the feeling of fear and terror seemed to have become the new normal. The future is not only uncertain; it looks bleak, as well.

Staying idle and resigning oneself to negativities could only aggravate the pandemic crisis. Philosophy, in this regard, could be a consolation. The aim of the discussion that follows will explain this claim. I will draw lessons from two Roman classical sources – Lucretius and Aurelius – on the relevance of philosophy in times of pandemic.

The first part of the paper provides a descriptive presentation of the plague that brought misery in the Roman empire during the Peloponnesian War. Lucretius is an excellent reference for this task. Nevertheless, I argue that Lucretius' account is insufficient in terms of specific normative measures. It is reasonable to say that "Lucretius never pretended to respond to the questions of our time."² However, because he provided a modest interpretation of Thucydides' version of the plague, one can draw from him a normative response, as well.³ Lucretius' account can open the door to making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic that the global community faces. It is true that Lucretius was a man of

² I thank the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this view.

³ Lucretius' account of the plague was an interpretation of an earlier version, i.e., Thucydides' account. Lucretius was not therefore a first-hand witness to the plague but an interpreter of a source. With the earlier source, a valid suggestion would be to offer a focused analysis of Thucydides' narrative of the plague in this paper. However, I decided to engage with Lucretius (and Aurelius) instead of other classical philosophers of the plague in that his views and accounts are controversial. Academic researchers seldom agree on their editorial works and commentaries of Lucretius. My paper does not intend to put unity and clarity to end the disagreements. Rather, it serves as a contribution to Lucretius scholarship regarding health crisis mitigation. See H. S. Jr. Commager, "Lucretius Interpretation of the Plague," In *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Lucretius*. Edited by Monica R. Gale (New York, USA, Oxford University Press 2007), 182-197.

his time, but his views are not meant only for his context. To say otherwise lacks appreciation of the lessons that can be drawn from him.

The second part addresses the gap in Lucretius by offering the recommendations of Aurelius who, himself, is not alien to the destructive forces of plagues. He is a witness to the damaging outcome of the Antonine plague, which is named after him. Somebody could argue that the relevance of Aurelius' account lies on the practical and sensible suggestions on how to live with the pandemic crisis. Accordingly, the claim that the uncertainty of the future might put all efforts and accomplishments of civilizations into waste is not at all definitive. Instead, it might be an opportunity for both the local and global community to respond best to dilemmas that confront them.

Lucretius and The Plague: A Nutritive and Destructive World

Explicating Lucretius' conception of the plague, I begin with the exploration of his distinction between nutritive and destructive elements in the world. A description of their impact on living things, mainly, the human organism follows. Also, I provide an analysis of his notion of the plague, and the reaction and responses of victims of the plague.

Lucretius observed that the material world could be a fertile ground for living things to germinate and develop. However, he also noticed that the same world is not unfamiliar with the presence of various elements that could trigger their degeneration and demise. As he claims, "elements of numerous substances that are beneficial to life" abound but also admits that "there must be many flying about that produce disease and death."⁴ If there is one commonality shared by both invisible particles, it is nature. As will be pointed out below, the

⁴ Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Cambridge/Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 1090. Hereafter, books and/or verses shall be cited.

“seeds” of health and root causes of disease are found in nature (i.e., the particles or matter that is accessible to the senses). But what are these elements that nurture and destroy life? What are their characteristics? When can they be considered beneficial or non-beneficial to life?

Lucretius’ treatise on the plague does not specify the precise content of these substances. Of course, one could make inferences based on the information that is scantily scattered in his writings. Nonetheless, he seems confident that there are “elements of numerous substances” that are either beneficial or harmful to life.

Someone could claim, for instance, that a destructive or beneficial substance has a link to food. This assumption is warranted. Is it not the case that the right food and amount of food eaten could serve as a medicine for the body? While others could infer that the numerous substances are related to food seems correct and acceptable, it is inadequate, however. Lucretius suggests that water and air are also sources of substances that affect living organisms, in general, and human beings in particular. Because of their access to food, water, air, sunlight among other sources of elements, they grow, develop, and produce.

While there are substances which nurture living things, there are also elements which are harmful to health. To go back to the argument above, it makes sense to note that substances linked to food could have negative repercussions on health. If the substance of food can benefit living things, excessive food intake can also be harmful. Lucretius was clear about other substances that are characteristically destructive and disadvantageous to living organisms. One could surmise that the latter kind of substances are contaminated with toxic elements which put health at risk. When the body absorbs harmful substances, it begins to weaken. The body deteriorates with the absence of the right medicine. Lucretius would agree with this point of view. He even claimed that the existence of contaminated substances causes health issues upon living beings, leading to unprecedented widespread pestilence,

destruction of life and death.⁵ In addition, a disease could be contracted through contaminated waters. The source of the illness is “outside our world that comes down through the sky, like clouds and mists.” Also, it “rises in a body from the earth itself.”⁶ Of this natural event, one could think, for example, of a warm day where rain suddenly pours on dry soil. The sudden meeting of heat and cold could be harmful to human species. An individual could suffer from various illnesses such as runny nose, nausea or dizziness because of this natural phenomenon. And where a disease spreads uncontrollably, it could turn into a plague.

The Notion of Plague in Lucretius

By plague, Lucretius meant the “destructive blast on the human race and flocks and herds.”⁷ Plague does not discriminate between rich and poor, and people and livestock when it strikes. No one gets exempted from being inflicted with a disease brought about by the plague. The social and cultural affiliation, economic status, and political alliance could not save one from it. Perhaps the economically well off could buy time, but anyone could be contaminated by and suffer from the plague. Its scope knows no boundary and inflicts suffering upon those it comes across. However, this does not yet answer what makes a plague as such and what are the indications that point to the outbreak of a health crisis? It could help to recall Lucretius’ observation of the various symptoms of the disease that plagued the city to answer the question.

Lucretius mentioned of people with excessive fever, deeply sunken red eyes, swollen throat, and hoarse voice, and who spit and sweat blood. Their

⁵ According to Pope, “This increase in mortality is a natural effect of the disease’s contagiousness combined with climate.” See Michael Pope, “Bodies Piled High: Lucretius, Lucan, and the Un/Natural Costs of Civil War,” *Classical Philology* 115, no. 2 (2020): p. 213. doi.org/10.1086/70773.

⁶ Lucretius, Bk. VI, v: 1100.

⁷ Ibid., v: 1090.

mouth produced a foul stench like an unburied corpse, and the saliva was almost dry, the cough was loud and raucous while nostrils were constricted. The infection attacked the heart while ulcers/boils covered the skin. Some victims continuously vomited, screamed out their pain, and agonized in anguish. They bore unexplainable complaints and moaned their distress. Others suffered from constant convulsion, loss of memory, and loss of mind. Still, others experienced body impairment as death approached, a fire-like sensation raged in the internal organs as in a furnace.⁸

The disease also affected the genitals, toes and fingers. Cutting them could prolong life and make one escape death's doom⁹ but this only prolongs the agony. Sooner or later, they are destined to perish anyway. Others suffered from "virulent discharge of foul blood."¹⁰ Lucretius further noticed that apart from humans, birds and beasts that feasted on unburied dead corpses showed the same symptoms. When they are infected, they could die. Other animals would not even dare to eat the dead corpses because of the foul stench.¹¹

From the descriptions provided, it could be said that a striking mark of a plague is the speed and scope of the spread of the disease. Another important inference that one could draw is the overwhelming psychological and emotional impact of the disease upon the people. The situation – scarcity of food, lack of effective and appropriate medicine, violent public hysteria, death of a relative or a close person, among others – appears to have pushed the people on the edge, and their desperate response to the health crisis does not seem to show some progress. Similar health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic point to this inference.

⁸ Ibid., v: 1150.

⁹ Ibid., v: 1210.

¹⁰ Ibid., v: 1210.

¹¹ Ibid., v: 1220.

Social scientists have come to the observation that people caught in a pandemic tend to manifest social, emotional, and psychological trauma.¹² These concerns are not limited to a particular sector of society but cuts across age groups, economic and social status, and racial affiliations. Researchers underscored that, for many people, the Covid-19 had robbed them of their usual way of life, adversely affected their livelihood and presented them with an uncertain future. It is also noted that the vulnerable population, especially the senior members of the community and patients with health problems, suffer greatly from social, emotional and psychological trauma caused by Covid-19 stressors. But what instances stimulate the acceleration and spread of the plague on a wider scale? How does a disease accelerate into a plague?

¹² For relevant research done in this area, see Michael L. Tee, Cherica A. Tee, Joseph P. Anlacan, Katrina Joy G. Aligam, Patrick Wincy C. Reyes, Vipat Kuruchittham, Roger C. Ho, "Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 277 (2020): pp. 379-391. doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.043; Inbar Levkovich, "Impact of Age on Negative Emotional Reactions, Compliance with Health Guidelines, and Knowledge About the Virus During the COVID-19 Epidemic: A Longitudinal Study from Israel," *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health* 11 (2020): pp. 1-10. doi.org/10.1177/2150132720981540; Jonathan Ripp, Lauren Peccoralo, and Dennis Charney, "Attending to the Emotional Well-Being of the Health Care Workforce in a New York City Health System During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Academic Medicine* 95, no. 8 (2020): pp. 1136-1139. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000003414; Raena Ullah and Syed Amin, "The psychological impact of COVID-19 on medical students," *Psychiatry Research* 288 (2020) 113022. doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113020; M. A. Ruiz & C. M. Gibson, "Emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. health care workers: A gathering storm," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 12 (2020): pp. 153-155. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000851; Vasileios Karampelias, Dimitris Karonis and Varvara Psaroudi, "The psycho-emotional impact of COVID-19 on surgical staff working in emergency departments," *European Journal of Trauma and Emergency Surgery* 46 (3 June 2020): pp. 747-749. doi.org/10.1007/s00068-020-01411-3; Jessica Burrari, Paolo Roma, Benedetta Barchielli, Silvia Biondi, Pierluigi Cordellieri, Angelo Frascchetti, Alessia Pizzimenti, Cristina Mazza, Stefano Ferracuti and Anna Maria Giannini, "Psychological and Emotional Impact of Patients Living in Psychiatric Treatment Communities during Covid-19 Lockdown in Italy," *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 9, no. 3787 (2020): pp. 1-10. doi:10.3390/jcm9113787; Cindy N. Bui, Changmin Peng, Jan E. Mutchler, and Jeffrey A. Burr, "Race and Ethnic Group Disparities in Emotional Distress Among Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Gerontologist* (2020): pp. 1-29. doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa217.

Factors in the Spread of the Disease

Lucretius warned that an illness could quickly transfer from one individual to another where medicine is unavailable. Also, a disease easily spreads far and wide in a crowded place and through the air. The geographical conditions, movement, or migration of people, and change in the climate are contributory factors to the rise of the health crisis. I explicate Lucretius' observations in turn. In the meantime, however, it could be noted that a disease could turn into a plague when inadequately addressed.

The scarcity, if not the absence, of right medicine to tackle a disease is one factor that could lead to an unconstrained spread. A disease could go out of hand where the appropriate medical attention is not provided. This is especially true when a new illness emerges, striking people off-guard.

A crowded place, such as the public market, provides another right avenue for communicable diseases to thrive.¹³ Contagion also takes place in a hardly observed physical distance between individuals. The proximity between persons is a factor that sustains and even accelerates the spread of diseases. As Lucretius claims, the infection spreads as it is "brought in by crowds of plague-stricken peasants" or victims "who flock together from all sides,"¹⁴ although "all

¹³ Diseases could be roughly distinguished into highly communicable and non-communicable. One could think of hazardous and highly communicable diseases, such as the Ebola virus, viral hemorrhagic fevers, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (Mers-Cov) among others. See Jocelyn J. Herstein, Sean A. Buehler, Aurora B. Le, John J. Lowe, Peter C. Iwen, Shawn G. Gibbs, "Clinical Laboratory Equipment Manufacturer Policies on Highly Hazardous Communicable Diseases," *Public Health Reports* 134, no. 4 (2019): pp. 332-337. doi/10.1177/0033354919856936; Theodore J. Cieslak, Jocelyn J. Herstein, Mark G. Kortepeter, "Communicable Diseases and Emerging Pathogens: The Past, Present, and Future of High-Level Containment Care," in *Bioemergency Planning: A Guide for Healthcare Facilities*, edited by Angela Hewlett and A. Rekha K. Murthy (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018): pp. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77032-1>. I appreciate the anonymous reviewers for the instructive feedback.

¹⁴ Lucretius, Bk. VI, v: 1260.

the worthiest people meet death.”¹⁵ The chances of contracting a contagious disease are higher when both healthy and ailing persons mingle each other.

Lucretius saw the possibility of an airborne disease as another factor that puts health at risk. Diseases abound in the atmosphere, he claimed. But how do we understand a disease floating in the air? An airborne disease, in Lucretius’ understanding, refers to an odorous stench that an individual inhales.¹⁶ Toxic or polluted air may be harmful to our health. A rapacious disease enters a person through the air one breathes as it “travelled through the air and over the floating plains, eventually... delivered the people by thousand to disease and death.”¹⁷ Airborne diseases threaten health. However, this opinion does not say anything about airborne diseases that have no stench.

Lucretius further maintained that some illnesses are unique only to one region and not another. That is, the spread of disease is related to the environment one lives in. A particular disease thrives in one place but not necessarily in another. Some “regions are injurious to various parts of the body.”¹⁸ A disease could exist elsewhere but not in another. The geographical landscape, environmental conditions and change in climate do not only vary from one place to another but are a significant contributor to the spread of particular diseases.¹⁹ Consider, for example, the case of gout in Attica and Elephantiasis in the river Nile (Egypt), claimed Lucretius. Again, he added that these diseases are due to “variations in the air.”²⁰

Still another contributor to the rise of health concerns is related to the issue of the visitation of the sick and, by extension, people’s migration to another place due to personal, social, political, economic reasons. About diseases, this

¹⁵ Ibid., v: 1240.

¹⁶ Ibid., vv: 1130, 1240.

¹⁷ Ibid., v: 1140.

¹⁸ Ibid., v: 1110.

¹⁹ Ibid., v: 1100.

²⁰ Ibid., v: 1110.

could mean two things. On the one hand, a disease is transmitted through people.²¹ This is especially true when visiting pestilence-stricken families and friends.²² When one is not careful and unprotected, there is a chance of acquiring a disease. On the other hand, the change in climate has repercussions to health conditions.²³ It could either be harmful or beneficial to human beings. Moving into a different location, for instance, can make a person ill. This happens because the individual has not yet adjusted to the new environment.

Finally, Lucretius observed that race is also a possible condition for the spread of diseases. Does this mean that a disease could be related to race? By race, Lucretius seems to have in mind the classification of people based on their origin, genetic make-up, bloodline, and the geographical conditions of their surroundings. According to him, “It is evident that a particular disease attacks a particular race”²⁴ because they are susceptible to it. From his observation, it means that some races are vulnerable to and suffer from a particular disease and not another.

Reactions Towards the Plague

An essential aspect of Lucretius’ record of the plague was the attitude of the people. He noted that as the plague ravaged the region, many people showed a variety of behavior. Reactions of individuals towards the dreaded disease are shown in their behavior. Some were perturbed and anxious, while others tended to lawless conduct. Lucretius observed that an overwhelming health crisis caused confusion. Panicking as they were, the victims rushed and tumbled down into deep wells to find respite. They felt a burning sensation

²¹ Ibid., v: 1100.

²² Ibid.,v: 1240.

²³ Ibid., v:1100.

²⁴ Ibid., v: 1100.

inside their bodies. They throw themselves in cold water, and with a mouth widely-open, they quench their thirst, but to no avail.²⁵

Also, individuals in plague-stricken regions were anxious. The feeling of anxiety was caused by fear.²⁶ Henry Steel Commager Jr., commented that the reference of Lucretius' understanding of anxiety is psychological and not physical. Those who suffer severe diseases are afraid of death. Their fear was based on the assumption that life after death could be a period of grief and sorrow.²⁷ However, to think of sorrow and grief after death was ridiculous because life after death could not be proven to be true, Lucretius underlined. Nonetheless, Commager suggested that Lucretius' idea of fear was connected to the disruption of a meaningful and happy life in the here and now.²⁸

In addition, a health crisis may make someone feel anxious because of fear of contracting the disease.²⁹ Whether this attitude appeared unhelpful because it kept people "from engaging in appropriate action" is difficult to assess.³⁰ How would one not feel anxious about the countryside "scene of death, emptying the streets, and draining the city of citizens?"³¹ Who would not feel anxious when someone enforced dreadful and frightful measures regarding funerals and treatment of the dead such as burning of corpses due to "poverty and sudden emergency?"³²

Despair was another. By despair, Lucretius understood this as the feeling of having lost the hope to live. Despair thus refers to the belief that hanging on

²⁵ Ibid., vv: 1170, 1280.

²⁶ Commager, pp. 184-185.

²⁷ Ibid., 185.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lucretius, Bk. VI, v: 1190.

³⁰ Hiram Crespo, "An Epicurean Guide to Living More Pleasantly in Times of Coronavirus," *The Humanist* 4, (2020), pp. 22-24 accessed 11.10.2020. <https://thehumanist.com/features/articles/an-epicurean-guide-to-living-more-pleasantly-in-times-of-coronavirus>.

³¹ Lucretius, Bk. VI, v: 1140.

³² Ibid., v: 1280.

to dear life is meaningless without the needed social support. People feel sorrow and grief because of the uncertainty of prolonging life and the certainty of death. As Lucretius noted, they find themselves helpless, “alone and destitute of help.”³³ Their “mind distracted with despair and dread” because of the overwhelming plague.³⁴ Accordingly, the “people behave as though they were doomed to die”; when they know they have been infected, they abandon all hope, lay on their bed and wait in agony for their death.³⁵

Responses to Pestilence

Lucretius claimed that medical treatment was the only recourse in times of plague. But what if treatment is ineffective? Could people rely on gods and divine interventions? Lucretius was firm that even the gods if there are, will be overwhelmed and unresponsive. Treating the gods with altar sacrifices is only a waste of resources.³⁶ The gods are relatively helpless as temples are filled with corpses. According to Lucretius, “by this time (pestilence) neither the worship of the gods nor their divinity counted for much. They were overwhelmed by the present calamity.”³⁷ Sacrifices and rites of offering on the altar of gods and goddesses did not contribute to addressing the plague. The gods seemed silent, distant and indifferent. The people have only themselves to rely on. But still, they can only support each other according to their means. Lucretius claimed that doctors are “frightened into silence”, and all they could do was to “mumble”,

³³ Ibid., v: 1240.

³⁴ Ibid., v: 1190.

³⁵ Ibid., v: 1230.

³⁶ Recent scholarship proposes the view that religious ritual and animal sacrifice in Lucretius is socially destructive. This claim deviates from the Epicurean doctrine that regards ritual sacrifice as advantageous to social bond. Part of Lucretius’ idea stems from the damaging and violence elements of the sacrificial ritual. See Zackary Rider, “The Failure of Sacrifice in the *De Rerum Natura*,” *TAPA (Transactions of the American Philological Association)* 149, no. 1 (Spring 2019): pp. 1-26; Robert Patrick Stone Lazo, “Lucretius’s Venus and Epicurean Compassion toward Non-domesticated Animals,” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2015): pp. 159-166.

³⁷ Lucretius, Bk. VI, v: 1280.

not knowing what to do.³⁸ Doctors are perplexed with “no sure method of treatment that was universally effective.” Also, the air “proved poison to others and caused their death.”³⁹

While victims are “perishing through lack of attention,”⁴⁰ the medical practitioners, nonetheless “tend to the sick because of their *sense of shame* and the patients pleading accents mingled with accents of reproach.”⁴¹ Could it be that a serious attention to the sick was strong on the part of doctors and carers because of the feeling and thought that they were needed, thus making them proud of their profession? Does their action express a desire to give their best? Or, was it done to evade ostracization from those who sought after their expertise? Is the sense of shame perhaps occasioned by their oath to treat the sick whatever circumstances there maybe? Again, one could only surmise.

Lucretius’ Inadequate Guideline During a Plague

Lack, if not the absence, of specific philosophical guidance during a health crisis could be noticed from Lucretius’ investigation of the plague, even while he described, in detail, its causes and effects upon individuals. Could this be related to the view that a philosopher’s business cannot provide concrete steps to managing a crisis? Would the philosopher not be considered neglectful not to offer a list of ways for people to live their lives during a plague?

Perhaps, the absence of a satisfactory response to the plague in Lucretius’ treatise is the fact that he was (1) only interested in recounting the event, and (2) motivated by the recognition of a division of labor in the governance of public affairs.

³⁸ Ibid., v: 1180.

³⁹ Ibid., v: 1230.

⁴⁰ Ibid., v: 1240.

⁴¹ Ibid., v: 1240, emphasis mine.

On the one hand, he acted as a chronicler, which understandably gives the impression that he was only interested in presenting a vivid description of the plague. However, would this approach not beg more questions than provide answers even if the account appears to be very objective. Accordingly, Lucretius did not need to offer a normative account, hence the descriptive approach. On the other hand, as someone who was probably keen on the clear boundaries and tasks of different groups in managing society, Lucretius, probably acted cautiously. Velázquez puts the role of philosophy thus: “The philosopher's task is not to find the meaning of life or to tell others how they should live but to provide conceptual tools useful to those who make difficult decisions, in communicating and explaining them to others.”⁴² Calamities such as plagues, storms, earthquakes and floods are a government’s turf to manage. They fall within the obligation and duty of political authorities, and not philosophers. Of course, this does not mean that philosophy has no place in the discourse on issues that upset society. Philosophy could always serve as a guide in decision-making.

In what follows, I introduce Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, a stoic, a general and a philosopher.⁴³ He witnessed a dreadful plague named after him, the Antonine Plague of 166 CE.⁴⁴ Perhaps, from his experience and salient ideas,

⁴² G. Lourdes Velázquez, “The role of philosophy in the pandemic era,” *Bioethics Update* 6, no. 2 (2020): 92-100. doi: 10.1016/j.bioet.2020.08.001.

⁴³ For a brief introduction of Marcus Aurelius, see Anthony Birley, “Marcus Aurelius, Philosopher- Emperor” *History Today* 11, no. 12 (1961): p. 853; Frederic W. H. Myers, “Marcus Aurelius Antoninus,” *Fortnightly review* 31, no. 185 (May 1865-June 1934, 1882): pp.564-586; Anthony J. Papalas, “Marcus Aurelius and Three Sophists,” *Aevum* 53, no. 1 (1979): pp. 88-93.

⁴⁴ The Antonine plague was described as one of the most devastating yet less known among the great epidemics that occurred in the ancient world. The other two plagues happened in 430 to 429 BCE in Athens during the reign of Pericles and 542 CE at the time of emperor Justinian respectively. I do not intend to discuss them in detail on this paper. What is more interesting for this paper to consider though is Aurelius’ response to the plague. For their exposition of the Antonine Plague in relation to other plagues in antiquity, see J. Rufus Fears, “The plague under Marcus Aurelius and the decline and fall of the Roman Empire,” *Infectious Disease Clinics of North America* 18, no. 1 (2004): pp. 65-77, doi: 10.1016/S0891-5520(03)00089-8; James Frank Gilliam, “The Plague under Marcus Aurelius,” *American journal of philology* 82, no. 327 (1961): pp. 225-251.

some important lessons can be learned especially on how to live with a purpose even in a time of pandemic. The plague persisted for years during his reign and took around 5 million lives. Aurelius' long experience with the plague, in my view, makes him the right person to refer to when it comes to mitigating adequately a health crisis.

Aurelius and the Antonine Plague: The Task of Philosophy in Time of Pandemic

How does philosophy help people and institutions make sense of a pandemic? I point out five, namely: (1) freedom from anxiety and the value of inner peace, (2) commitment to individual responsibility, (3) respect of political freedom, (4) to live the present moment, and (5) solidarity. These lessons learned are drawn largely from Aurelius and address Lucretius' misgivings regarding the consolations of philosophy during times of pandemic. They serve as the contribution of philosophy to individuals and society who seek consolation, create meaning and value amid the global health crisis. I discuss them in turn.

The first task of philosophy relates to freedom from anxiety, and the importance of inner peace. There are many sources of anxiety. Aurelius claims that a person is anxious of his own troubles, the opinions of others about him, "physical pain or distress," the inevitability of death and the presence of calamities.⁴⁵ While freedom from anxiety is desirable, the determination of the individual to confront life's circumstances could easily be hampered by external pressures. Calamities and pandemics could threaten the direction one has set for one's self. Nevertheless, Aurelius reminds people to turn obstacles into great

⁴⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *The Emperor's Handbook [Meditations], Book IV*, trans. David Hicks, C. Scot Hicks (New York/London: Scribner, 2002), no. 3. Hereafter, references will provide the author, book chapter and verse number in each of the book, except for the "Introduction" part by Hicks and Hicks.

opportunities. But how should we turn adversities to advantages? Perhaps a “creative problem-solving” amidst crisis could be pursued with a clear mind and reasonable intention.⁴⁶

Aurelius further counsels, “nothing outside the mind can disturb it – trouble comes from the mind’s opinions of what lies outside it [and] that everything you now see will change in a moment and soon be no more.”⁴⁷ Tranquility seems to be the key to facing life’s tribulations. The external concerns are fickle, but what is essential is peace of mind. A pandemic crisis is an example of an external circumstance which, for Aurelius, has no power over a person. Instead, it is the other way around. Tranquility is shown in the way people think about their situation. One’s mindset matters when faced with challenges. Also, to think reasonably and act accordingly would depend on inner disposition. Negative thoughts about the pandemic restrain individuals from thinking clearly and acting rightly. It also constrains individuals from adequately treating problems with a clear goal in mind. Accordingly, problems could dictate upon thoughts and emotions, but to allow this to happen could lead to destructive repercussions.

But does this mean that people should not worry and feel afraid, say, in times of pandemic? Should people not feel irritable and dismay when activities and programs do not come out as planned? Would it be psychologically and emotionally advantageous to dismiss these feelings? Does being afraid help? Some might find a stoic’s response inadequate. But from his perspective, a courageous focus, if you may call it, is to soar above self-defeating views. For instance, Aurelius says: “I hear you say, ‘How unlucky that this should happen to me’ Not at all! Say instead, ‘How lucky that I am not broken by what has happened and am not afraid of what is about to happen.’ The same blow might have struck, but not many would have absorbed it without capitulation or

⁴⁶ Hicks and Hicks, “Introduction,” 8

⁴⁷ Aurelius, Book IV, 3.

complaint.”⁴⁸ To some extent, this seems correct. Isn't it that worrying so much is not good for health?

With this view, however, people's feelings should not be dismissed. Aurelius suggests that people should be attentive to things that make them worry, impatient, and inconsiderate. It is like asking, “What am I afraid of? Why am I worried and impatient?” These have to be identified in order to decide wisely and do the appropriate action.

The second task of philosophy admonishes individuals of their responsibility. “The good man isn't looking for cheaters. He dashes straight for the finish and leans into the tape.”⁴⁹ Aurelius' famous watchword, indicates a commitment to responsibility to save “time and effort” [and] “to make it holy and just.”⁵⁰ Also, the commitment to responsibility hints at one's character – the determination and courage to face the situation a person finds herself in. The opposite of which is cowardice before adversity. But there is more. Responsibility refers to freedom which in Aurelius' view is connected to a good cause, the outcome of one's action and the acknowledgement of events that are beyond one's control.⁵¹

A pandemic crisis might slow down people's activities, but it should not hinder a right cause to flourish. Following the thought of Aurelius, people should be warned against selfishness. But the current pandemic showed that institutions that are supposed to alleviate sufferings and channel relief could be used to serve one's interest. In this case, greed is the enemy of charity because it takes people away from their responsibility. Until people learn to act for a good cause, a significant portion of society will remain marginalized.

⁴⁸ Aurelius, Book IV, 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁵¹ Hicks and Hicks, “Introduction,” in *The Emperor's Handbook*, 9.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic made people realize that no matter how advanced societies are concerning science and technology and governance there are concerns, which needed to be taken care of seriously lest they become detrimental to health crisis mitigation response. Consider the fragility of people's health. The scientific community, especially in medicine, carries out experiments that strengthen individuals' resistance from infectious diseases. Science has proven very helpful in this respect. While it has not yet developed the perfect vaccine that effectively protects people from the virus, the scientific knowledge that comes with it is highly commendable. For example, the anti-COVID-19 vaccines that have been developed in recent months is a sign of hope. Perhaps, sooner or later, the pandemic will be overcome.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic also revealed “the contrasting strengths and weaknesses in governance and leadership across the globe,” says Daniel Kauffman, a Senior Fellow at the Global Economy and Development.⁵² Poor government leadership is related to worsening accountability, unbridled corruption, deteriorating transparency, and rampant human rights violation. However, poor governance is disastrous for the healthcare system because it jeopardizes transparency and accountability. Lack of democratic values, if not the absence of it, could derail science. If solidarity, fairness, freedom and obligations to justice are compromised, perhaps an event which is far worse than the present pandemic would emerge. But there is still hope. Some governments in Europe and Asia, such as Germany, Japan and Singapore have remarkably shown that the pandemic could be addressed with a practical and functioning governance system.⁵³ But what action could be endorsed? Kauffman suggests that “For a start, officials could leverage transparency and accountability to move toward more effective and equitable (and thus non-captured) economic

⁵² Daniel Kauffman, “What the pandemic reveals about governance, state capture, and natural resources,” *Future Development*, July 10, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/07/10/what-the-pandemic-reveals-about-governance-state-capture-and-natural-resources/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

policies and packages that strengthen the health sector and the pandemic response.”⁵⁴ Tackling the pandemic this way could free us from despair.

Surrendering into despair and perturbation should be the last decision one makes. At a time of health crisis, Aurelius admonishes everyone to take up the challenge. That is, turning the health crisis to one of humanity's greatest opportunity to learn lessons from and to forge cooperation. Because individuals are larger than themselves, they are supposed to go out of their way by treating others justly. Aurelius encourages, “Don’t become disgusted with yourself, lose patience, or give up if you sometimes fail to act as your philosophy dictates, but after each setback, return to reason and be content if most of your acts are worthy of a good man.”⁵⁵ The courage to face the health crisis is not merely about winning the war against the pandemic but forming people's character and attitude. Character-building is needed for the care of the self and in the service of those in dire need and help.

Enjoining citizens to speak for the respect of political freedom is the third task of philosophy. Aurelius believed in “the idea of a state in which all men are equal under the law and free to say what they think, and of an empire that respects above all else the liberty of its subjects.”⁵⁶ This sounds suspect in that Aurelius upheld the distinction and division between the elite ruling class or nobility and the slave. Also, he appeared intolerant of Christians, persecuting them for their adherence to Christ. Nonetheless, the statement of Aurelius indicates his vision of an ideal state and political relations. One can imagine that this state upholds the rule of law, supports transparency and advocates the rights of people, especially in public health emergencies.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used and is still being used by various governments in different parts of the world to justify their

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Aurelius, Book V, 9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Book I, 14.

decision to restrict people's movement. For example, imposing the confinement of people in their houses just because of a few cases of Covid-19 seems unreasonable. Would it not suffice to contain the movement of only those who are infected by the virus? To lockdown a whole town does not seem helpful at all from the social and economic perspectives. Instead, this approach could further aggravate an ailing and collapsing economy.⁵⁷ Also, it exacerbates a psycho-emotionally distraught population. Indeed, the government has the responsibility to implement strict guidelines that ensure the safety of the public. It may also enforce unpopular public health measures that reduce the human-to-human spread of the infection and ascertain the effectiveness of the same although efforts to do so should not violate human rights precepts.

However, reflecting on the procedures taken so far, some guidelines are objectionable from ethical and legal perspectives. Seemingly, several governments treat affected people unjustly and unfairly as regards access to health care, vaccine, and food provisions.⁵⁸ Such treatment is based on economic status and political allegiance.⁵⁹ Exclusive regard for the haves in contrast to the exclusion of the have nots is very apparent. The pandemic shows the increasing divide between economically well-off individuals and those in dire poverty. People with strong political influence and economic capital seem to enjoy a privilege-like position when accessing the public goods than ordinary citizens, low-income workers, and self-employed individuals. Some individuals with political influence tend to circumvent the law, apparently skirting through burdensome quarantine measures. The above circumstances are ethically unacceptable because they derail the fair treatment of all members of society.

⁵⁷ Richard Blundell, Monica Costa Dias, Robert Joyce and Xiaowei Xu, "Covid-19 and Inequalities," *Fiscal Studies* 41, no. 2 (2020): pp. 291-319. doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12232.

⁵⁸ Harald Schmidt, "Vaccine Rationing and the Urgency of Social Justice in the Covid-19 Response," *Hastings Center Report* 50 (2020): pp. 46-49. doi: 10.1002/hast.1113.

⁵⁹ Carrie Henning-Smith, Mariana Tuttle, Katy B Kozhimannil, "Unequal Distribution of COVID-19 Risk Among Rural Residents by Race and Ethnicity," *The Journal of Rural Health* 37, no. 1 (2021): pp. 224-226. doi: 10.1111/jrh.12463; Caroline Wanjiku Kihato and Loren B. Landau, "Coercion or the social contract? COVID 19 and spatial (in)justice in African cities," *Open access in City and Society* 32, no. 1 (2020): pp. 1-11. doi: 10.1111/ciso.12265.

Consequently, unfair treatment weakens the motivation of people to comply with the pandemic measures voluntarily. Moreover, it is an injustice to discriminate people because of ethnic or racial identity.⁶⁰ In my view, the effectivity of policies created to address the virus's incapacitating impact is anchored on fair treatment and obligations to justice.

The fourth task of philosophy invites people to live the present. Marcus reminds:

Do not panic before the picture of your entire life. Do not dwell on all the troubles you have faced or have yet to face, but instead ask yourself as each trouble comes: What is so unbearable and unmanageable in this? Your reply will embarrass you. Then remind yourself that it is not the future or the past that bears down on you, *but only the present, always the present...*⁶¹

To live the present moment is all that one has, and it is irreversible. Aurelius emphasized that the present is all that matters because it seems to be the only allotted time one could benefit and learn from. In the present, one could advance seemingly unavailable opportunities, offer adequate treatment to present concerns, among others. Focusing, for instance, on the pandemic, one lives in the present by living with the crisis. Connected to this view is the role of critical reflection. Whether the news one hears is true or fake; whether one or another solution is adequate to address the crisis, the critical reflection part could offer possible approaches to understand better any situation. This approach could help people face the present with courage and without pretensions.

⁶⁰ Platt, Lucinda and Ross Warwick. "COVID-19 and Ethnic Inequalities in England and Wales," *Fiscal Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 2020): pp. 259-289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12228>.

⁶¹ Aurelius, Book VIII, 36, emphasis mine.

The present moment matters to one's attention because it is all that one has, neither yesterday nor tomorrow. Growth opportunities are created in the present. This is true, one might as well live the present as if it were last. Disposition towards the health crisis emerges in the present. Deliverance from the pandemic is decided in the present. Yes, everything comes to pass even sickness and health, but the present is all that one has to maximize and live. If so, why would an individual allow it to slip away because of fear? Should people not simply *accept* the present – the fragility of man, the inevitability of death - and do what they can about it? To this view, Aurelius adds, “Wherever life is possible, it is possible to live in the right way.”⁶² In other words, a normative guide in living the present is to live ethically. That is “to conform to the nature of a reasonable and sociable being.”⁶³ This could be translated, by doing no harm upon and speaking ill of another person. Also, placing oneself at the service of “justice...and goodness,” never by what appeals to your taste for pleasure or popularity, would contribute to a well-meaning relationship among people.⁶⁴ Perhaps a consequence of living ethically is true happiness and inner peace because one does not have to comply with external pressures.⁶⁵

The promotion of solidarity is the fifth task of philosophy. By solidarity, I mean the ability to move out from one's comfort zones to experience the experience of the other. It is a solidarity based on compassion. That is, the ability to suffer with another. But this view is inadequate. The initial tendency of an individual is to safeguard his interest. In order to guarantee one's interest, the person tends to live by the principle of survival, according to which the fittest amongst members of society thrive. Conversely, one cannot survive without safeguarding one's interest. But the principle of survival as explained is the very opposite of the principle of solidarity that Aurelius endorses. The principle of

⁶² Ibid., Book V, 16.

⁶³ Aurelius, Book V, 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Book IV, 33.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Book VI, 51.

survival is short for abandonment. Solidarity is opposed to an action that abandons people who are in need.

According to Aurelius, solidarity is the ability not “to be carried away in your grief over another man’s loss, but to help him as best you can and as much as his loss deserves.”⁶⁶ It is the practice of generosity that is guided by the principle of total self-giving. Aurelius explains this by making a distinction between three kinds of people. The later kind exhibits a solidaristic character. The first relates to an individual who seeks something in return for a thing or an activity done for someone. The second kind of person is one who thinks of another as indebted because of a service rendered. The third kind of person “somehow doesn’t realize what he has done, but he is like a vine that bears its fruit and asks for nothing more than the pleasure of producing grapes.”⁶⁷

Aurelius lived the principles he laid for himself, and solidarity takes precedence in all his dealings with his subjects. In his view, principles find concrete expression in reaching out to those who suffer more and are in dire need than us. Principles, however grand, could only find meaning and purpose when translated to benefit the less fortunate and the marginalized. Principles are merely empty if they do not find expression in the active life with the world around, Aurelius emphasized. Take for example, the beautiful Smyrna in Asia which was struck by an earthquake and devastated the citizens of the place. Aurelius did not only “weep openly but ordered it rebuilt at public’s expense.”⁶⁸ Of course, one could assume that he also has misgivings, but his genuine solidarity to his people was finally confirmed when he died to live with his people. Aurelius was a man who fought and “died with his army on the banks of the Danube two months short of his fifty-ninth birthday.”⁶⁹ At his death, he “left

⁶⁶ Ibid., Book V, 36.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Book V, 6.

⁶⁸ Hicks and Hicks, “Introduction,” 9.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

behind a thin sheaf of notes that speak to the soul of anyone who ever exercised authority or faced adversity or believed in a better day.”⁷⁰

One could say that Aurelius’ sense of solidarity is connected to happiness and purpose of life. The meaning of which is realized not by being indifferent to the sufferings of the people within one’s midst. Perhaps, solidarity, not only during the time of the pandemic, is best nourished through cooperation, little acts of kindness, reaching out, and listening to the cares of others. This seemed to be Aurelius’ philosophy which did not lose its relevance in and for today’s world.

I turn now to the last part of the essay by drawing lessons from the discussion above and relate it to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Lucretius’ Plague and Aurelius’ Consolation: Lessons Learned for the COVID-19 Pandemic

What lessons can be drawn from Lucretius and Aurelius for us experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic? I offer three points, namely: (A) the role of human beings, (B) reasonableness with science and philosophy, and (C) the relevance of religion.

(A) Humans may be helpless in the face of a pandemic, but they can confront the challenge.

Faced with a pandemic, humans could either resign to submission or put up a fight. On the one hand, those who submit themselves to the destructive impact of a plague without exerting effort to tackle them would easily and unsurprisingly fall victim. On the other hand, those who stand against the plague could probably succeed through constant searching for alternative and

⁷⁰ Ibid.

reasonable approaches. Applying this to the current situation, the approach of individuals to a pandemic could determine the fate of their life and society. According to commentators, the plague that struck the ancient Roman empire became a catalyst of its downfall.⁷¹ And the wars waged between groups contributed to the spread of the contagion, as well.

As to the case of the Antonine Plague, Sabbatani and Sirio noted, “[t]he spread of the epidemic was favoured by the occurrence of two military episodes in which Marcus Aurelius himself took part: the Parthian War in Mesopotamia and the wars against the Marcomanni in northeastern Italy, in Noricum and in Pannonia.”⁷² The unfortunate event was caused by fear and anxiety towards contagious disease and death.

The plague was too overwhelming for the people of the ancient time because they could not contain it. While it might be correct to note that a plague could contribute to the decline of empires, the rise of new civilizations could emerge from it as well. The epidemic interrupts the socio-political, economic and cultural activities. As a catastrophic historical moment however, the plague could point to the discovery of alternative mitigating mechanisms. Hence, the fate of society does not have to be jeopardized by a contagious disease.

The COVID-19 pandemic proved that human beings could be helpless. It has made people realize that no matter how advanced societies are with respect to science and technology, some areas and events in life are difficult to control. Recent healthcare services are incomparably superior to that of our forebears, but the health crisis we currently experience humiliates us. There are things we

⁷¹ John Haldon, Hugh Elton, Sabine R Huebner, Adam Izdebski, Lee Mordechai and Timothy P. Newfield, “Plagues, climate change, and the end of an empire: A response to Kyle Harper’s *The Fate of Rome* (3): Disease, agency, and collapse,” *History compass* 16, no.12 (2018): pp. 1-10 doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12507.

⁷² Sergio Sabbatani and Sirio Fiorino “The Antonine Plague and the Decline of the Roman Empire,” *Le Infezioni in Medicina* 17, no. 4 (December 2009): p. 274, accessed 10.10.2020, https://www.infezmed.it/media/journal/Vol_17_4_2009_11.pdf.

are in control of but there are other issues and concerns that are not within our power. However, the health crisis neither points to people's lack of foresight, nor cowardice. Should this view be accepted, the experience of anxiety and despair⁷³ at the time of pandemic could be turned into channels of success.⁷⁴

Aurelius admonishes everyone to take up the demands of the health crisis and rise above it. The challenge is how to turn this dreaded event into one of those forces that inspire individuals to go out of their way to reach out the most affected members of society. Aurelius encourages thus, "Don't become disgusted with yourself, lose patience, or give up if you sometimes fail to act as your philosophy dictates, but after each setback, return to reason and be

⁷³ For a succinct exposition of the notion of despair from a Christian and secular perspectives, see Rowena A. Pecchenino, "Have we cause for despair?" *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 58 (2015): pp. 56-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2015.07.003>.

⁷⁴ Success stories of people in times of despair are not uncommon. Many people suffered the brunt of calamities such as typhoons but carried on with life through collective assistance. Some experienced financial breakdown but through determination eventually rose from it. Others turned from rags to riches because of diligence. Still, others suffered the violence of terror but did not allow such experience to dampen their spirits. These people emerged victorious for having braved the difficulties and hardships that came their way no matter how difficult those experiences were. Of course, a pandemic is a different traumatic concern. However, an important principle to learn from the above examples is to drop the annihilating words, "give up" from one's vocabulary. See, Pacoma, Ara Joy U. and Jake S. Delda. "Social capital in the post-Haiyan setting: The role of local and translocal ties in building household resilience," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 40 (November 2019): pp. 101-250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2019.101250>; Pauline Eadie and Yvonne Su, "Post-disaster social capital: trust, equity, bayanihan and Typhoon Yolanda," *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 27, no. 3 (2018): pp. 334-345. <https://doi-org.kuleuven.ezproxy.kuleuven.be/10.1108/DPM-02-2018-0060>; Pauline Eadie, "Typhoon Yolanda and post-disaster resilience: Problems and challenges," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 60, no. 1 (2019): pp. 94-107. doi:10.1111/apv.12215; Joseph Omoremi, "Inventor rises above despair, finds success," *Chicago Defender* (17 February 2001): p. 47; Pamela Parseghian, "Windows on the world: From the height of success to the depths of despair, survivors of 9/11 seek to carry on," *Nation's Restaurant News* (September 30, 2002): pp. 100, 102, 104; Peter Bach and Chresten Sloth Christensen, "From Despair to Optimism: The Success Story of Danish Education," *Royal Society of Arts Journal* 140, no. 5430 (June 1992): pp. 443-451. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41375878>. COHA Research Associate Fabrizio Chollet, "Despite Economic Despair, New IBM Technology Brings a Success Story to the North of Mexico," *Council on Hemispheric Affairs* 36, no. 14 (August 12, 2016): pp. 1-4.

content if most of your acts are worthy of a good man.”⁷⁵ The courage to face the health crisis is not only all about winning against this war but to form our character and attitude in the service of those in dire need of help.

(B) Human reliance in science and philosophy is vital in COVID-19 mitigation processes

Science could provide appropriate action in the face of a pandemic because the COVID-19 crisis falls within its job-description. The development of vaccine, for instance, comes with it a scientific knowledge that has been tested for years. An implication of a rigorous scientific approach guarantees the validity of its findings. Science clarifies misleading information and confusing practices in the public domain. A scientific approach to the health crisis is in line with philosophy’s core value, that is, reasonableness. By reasonableness, I mean the capacity of groups to go out their way to discuss matters together, challenging hearsays. They take this route in that the welfare of the society is at stake. Because matters of public interest are not a personal property of an individual, but the society at large, the imposition of one’s self-interest and power play have no place. In science as in philosophy, an activity, such as COvid-19 mitigation procedure, is acceptable insofar as it is grounded on reason. Does this view imply that activities intended to address the pandemic, but are outside the realm of science and philosophy may be better left aside? Consider the notion of faith-healing, which does not seem to fall within the bounds of reason. It is detached from the standard set by the scientific community. If this claim is correct, why should one put confidence in faith-healing? Because faith-healing alone might be inadequate to rely on, it is advisable to seek the help of the scientific community. Of course, one has no right to prohibit groups who intend to have recourse on faith-healing as a remedy during the pandemic, just as no one is restricted to avail of the services of science. Of course, it is advisable to be cautious of individuals who use the global health crises in order deceive.

⁷⁵ Aurelius, Book V, 9.

Also, philosophy could be an instrument of intellectual and moral growth for people when it speaks and challenges views that are detrimental to human life's progress. Crespo thus agrees when he says,

The Iphigenia episode is reminiscent of what happens when pastors rely on faith healing rather than real science, when members of certain Protestant sects reject blood transfusions for their own children because of their beliefs about the supernatural power of blood, or when parents keep their children from being vaccinated because they doubt scientific information—usually in deference to religion. When an innocent child or other innocent victims are sacrificed for nothing, life is wasted, and yet the gods remain deaf to the cries of mortals and nature continues to take its course.⁷⁶

Listening to scientific information, making oneself updated on the latest news on COVID-19 mitigation, might be the best preparation yet to protect people from the virus.

Furthermore, as part of philosophy's role in intellectual and moral development, it can push governments to think of policies that justly benefit all members of society, correcting vested interests that leave many lives unattended. Because everyone is affected by the health crisis, what philosophy can do is facilitate public discourse on many social issues. Perhaps, through public debate, the voices of the people who are left unheard all this time will find their way in public-decision and policymaking. The public discussion approach can generate alternative views and ways on how best to combat global health concern. Included in this topic are, but not limited to, respect for human rights convention on vaccination, equal access to medical and healthcare provision. Also, a public debate could clarify false information and mitigate misgivings when managing the pandemic crisis.

⁷⁶ Crespo, "An Epicurean Guide...", 24.

(C) Religion and the distant gods.

Religion plays an essential role in the life of people in many cultures.⁷⁷ In this case, religion is demonstrated through the observance of rituals for various events. One can think of healing practices as an example. However, some groups can be sceptical of gods and goddesses' existence, thus unwilling to be assisted. Lucretius is one among those who hold a sceptical view. For him, it seemed there are no gods to help and to protect human beings from plagues. Humans have only themselves to rely on.

In Aurelius, however, gods are sources of the individuals' "mind and reason."⁷⁸ Gods and goddesses are believed to put order in the cosmos. Apparently, from this perspective, humans could only be helped and directed in their quest for answers to issues that confront them. Hence, it seems that an appropriate practice is for people to "live with the gods [and] obey the divine will as revealed."⁷⁹ Nonetheless, whether the gods (who seemed deaf regarding agonizing cries of victims) are necessary or not when nature (and death) takes its course, is debatable.

Conclusion

The paper drew lessons from two examples of less known plagues that devastated peoples' lives in the Roman empire to make sense of the current global health crisis. This attempt did not pretend to answer all lingering questions on the pandemic. Instead, the paper emphasized that normative views

⁷⁷ Religion, for this paper, is conceived broadly. By this concept, I refer to an institution and its accompanying practices that the people organized for themselves concerning a supernatural being. These practices are expressed in different but interrelated ways, such as ancestor worship and sacrifice offerings to deities. These supernatural beings are believed to inhabit the sky and natural environment, i.e., mountains, trees, rivers, and rocks.

⁷⁸ Aurelius, Book V, 27.

⁷⁹ Ibid. See also Aurelius, Book II, 11.

and approaches towards the pandemic are crucial. As argued, the normative aspects are lacking in Lucretius but found expression in Aurelius. Furthermore, philosophy is a consolation at this juncture where the global community is overwhelmed by the current pandemic. Philosophy is instructive regarding anxiety and inner peace, responsibility, respect for political freedom, life in the present moment, and solidarity. In thinking about the relation between philosophy and pandemic, the paper underlined the flexibility of human beings in the face of a pandemic, the significant role of scientific and philosophical reason in health crisis mitigation, and the question of inadequacy and adequacy of religion to pandemic's devastating impacts.

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