

## The Promised Strand

Preview:

Human emotion has a history of notoriety with regards to clouding our judgement and abilities to make reliable predictions. This clouding is inevitable when concerning something as significant as a vaccination for a pandemic. Our task in this article is a twofold one: To identify precisely which of these elements are undesirables, and to then clear the air around the mirage that is the COVID-19 vaccine of them.

### 1. The Good

The first thing we must recognize is that the collective size of the machinery working to produce this ambrosia is absolutely massive.

On 4 May 2020, the WHO organized a televised fundraising event which received US\$8.1 billion in pledges from forty countries to support rapid development of vaccines to prevent COVID-19 infections.<sup>1</sup> To put this amount in some context, it alone is around forty times the total sum raised by the viral Ice Bucket Challenge a few years back.<sup>2</sup> And while this was the biggest individual fundraiser for a coronavirus vaccine, it is but one among a whole sea of them, each one involving various mind-boggling sums, going far beyond the average cost of production of a vaccine.

Complementing this is the manpower directed to achieve this goal: By April 2020 itself, almost 80 companies and institutes in 19 countries had put their best men on the job.<sup>3</sup> As of July, seven Indian pharmaceutical companies have officially been reported to be conducting research aimed at producing a vaccine.<sup>4</sup> And who knows how many independent researchers and enthusiasts are contributing to this behemoth of an effort in their own guerilla manners?

The sheer volume of the resources being diverted to this end appears to be bearing fruit: As of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2020, around half a dozen potential vaccines are in phase III of clinical trials.<sup>5</sup> This is the final stage of testing a vaccine undergoes before being released to the general public, and the speed at which this has been achieved is unprecedented, to say the least...and perhaps even alarming to the more prudent ones among us.

Efforts are also being made to try and repurpose already existing drugs and make them work as antagonists to the coronavirus; this distinct angle of approach has also now moved to clinical trials.<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, then, things seem to be looking rather nice and rosy so far—or at least, as nice and rosy as anything can be in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. International communities have managed to mobilize a vast network of resources, and they have resulted in marked acceleration and results insofar as the production of a vaccine is concerned. A five-year process which appears to be well en-route to being accomplished in a year.

What's the catch?

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<sup>1</sup> Wiki

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## 2. The Bad

A process which is supposed to take years to complete simply cannot be compressed into a couple of months without seriously increasing the stakes involved. Expanding the set of resources directed to the task can only accelerate in a constrained manner.

Failures in phase III of the clinical trials typically prove costly, and this cost is only partly financial. Due to the increasing number of human beings being subjected to testing, errors have the potential to be disastrous.<sup>7</sup> Even as I write this article, I find out that the Oxford vaccine trials, which were in phase III and had captured much of public attention and hope, have been paused due to the detection of an unexpected neurological symptom.<sup>8</sup>

Even if the law of averages did produce one sufficiently successful vaccine, the question arises as to whether it justifies the cost of the other various failures. Combining multiple steps in a clinical trial due to capitalistic pressure and reaching phase III in a hurry has the potential to spell unmitigated disaster.

For indeed, kindly philanthropy apart, this capitalistic pressure, the so-called “gold rush”, has proven to be a massive instigator in the acceleration of this process; and while we have gone over the apparent positives of this acceleration in the previous section, it is time to acknowledge the fact that this motive lying at the bottom of it all is by nature a veritable germ.

“Vaccine nationalism” has been recognized as a very real problem by the WHO.<sup>9</sup> As the name suggests, this refers to various wealthy countries attempting to selfishly appropriate the serum for their own population without considering the requirements of the people living beyond their borders; France, Canada, the USA and Britain are among a few accused of this.<sup>10</sup>

Aggravating this is the fact that unaffordable healthcare is a widely prevalent issue in many places; worries about this unaffordability manifesting itself in the coronavirus vaccine as well have been voiced by many.<sup>11</sup>

Efforts have been made in order to overcome these systematic inequalities inherent in the capitalist structure: Most notable is the COVAX initiative by WHO, an attempt to maintain fair and equitable distribution of the eventual vaccine.<sup>12</sup> But one may still reserve the right to remain skeptical, considering the typical imperfections present in systems founded on capitalist motives.

## 3. The Ugly

We have gone over a couple of the most striking aspects, encouraging and discouraging, of the COVID-19 vaccine as it stands right now.

But let us suppose that we are, globally, able to combat these potential issues.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.parexel.com/application/files\\_previous/5014/7274/5573/ACT\\_Article.pdf](https://www.parexel.com/application/files_previous/5014/7274/5573/ACT_Article.pdf)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/who-herd-immunity-requires-effective-vaccine-6560062/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-is-vaccine-nationalism-how-does-it-impact-the-fight-against-covid-19-6561236/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/27/21155879/alex-azar-coronavirus-vaccine-affordable-insurance>

<sup>12</sup>

The ultimate point to be made is that our problems are still not over. An injection is not a magic wand which can simply snap a pandemic out of existence.

This is something that the WHO has already tried to generate awareness regarding.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps one obvious indicator supporting this is the fact that throughout human history, pandemics have always heralded a shift in the mechanism of societies, economies and class structures.

We have to also acknowledge the widely varying efficacies for different vaccines, and the fact that research suggests that natural antibodies for the coronavirus deplete in utility fairly rapidly.<sup>14</sup>

And perhaps most frustratingly, we have also to account for the prevalence of *misinformation*. For a vaccine to effectively combat a pandemic, the fact is that it must work for *everyone*, for this is simply the nature of a pandemic: It makes us all highly dependent on one another.

It should be rather telling that this very article itself is, by and large, an attempt to minimize its existence. Having seen the kind of conspiracy theories going on with regards to prevention of the virus, only a fool would be optimistic enough to believe that the same is not going to happen for the cure.

Anti-vaxxers already constitute an unfortunately large segment of the population. But leaving this rather 'special' category of people aside for the moment...

The number of unproven and likely falsified methods claiming to be a 'cure' against the coronavirus is staggering to behold. Exploiting the hopes and desperations of the people, exploiting their need to feel a sense of control over their own lives, various organizations have resorted to this for some quick money, which, unsurprisingly, often result in mishaps.<sup>15</sup>

Many people have also been deceived by the quick pace at which phase III trials have been reached, and a conspiracy theory claiming that a vaccine has already been made but is being kept from the general public caught traction a while ago.<sup>16</sup>

The problem of misinformation in general goes far beyond the scope of this article, but for the moment, we shall let the matter rest here, having pointed out a few instances of its potential to cause difficulties.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

It is my hope that, with this article, pessimism as well as optimism temper themselves to find a middle ground from which they gaze out upon the mirage of the coronavirus vaccine, predicting and speculating. Much has been done which is praiseworthy, but equally much remains to be done if we wish to combat this oft-called 'man-made' pandemic.

Finally, I would like to allow Edward Jenner, the father of vaccinology, to conclude my article for me:

*"The highest powers in our nature are our sense of moral excellence, the principle of reason and reflection, benevolence to our creatures and our love of the Divine Being."*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/21/who-warns-a-coronavirus-vaccine-alone-will-not-end-pandemic.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/science/19798>

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