

COVID-19 and Critical thinking: A Philosophical Reflection

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Abstract

The COVID-19 (and its variants) and the various measures put in place to contain its spread has introduced a new attitude in the way people interact with each other and relate to the world. On one hand, established values and norms are being unpacked and transformed. Ordinary expressions such as hugging, handshake are being replaced with social distancing, face masks and digital communication. On the other hand, confusion and contradictions have followed its emergence. Even though medical experts have been able to account for its spread, no satisfactory explanation has been given for its actual cause, the effectiveness of the many vaccines so far produced for its cure, and whether humanity will ever be free of its scourge. These separately and together are causing a lot of fear and anxiety especially in Africa due to her reliance on the West for both interpretation of the virus and its vaccine. How best can Africa meet the challenge imposed by COVID-19? How can she confront her fears and even use this as an opportunity to reposition itself in the global community and push for a better arrangement in world affairs? What measures should Africa take to manage the many contradictions trailing the pandemic? How can Africa harness her resources to join in the search for an effective cure for the virus? How can African countries forge a common solidarity that will enable their voices to count in matters of global concern? To resolve these issues among others, the study employs critical thinking as the analytic tool. Critical thinking involves subjecting ideas and experiences to impartial and rational assessment so as to distil from them the right response that fits a particular situation and apply it to that situation. In employing critical thinking to investigate an issue of serious existential concern, the study makes a case for the continued relevance of philosophy in contributing to the resolution of practical matters that affect humanity.

KEY WORDS: Critical thinking, COVID-19, Africa, Philosophy

Introduction

COVID-19 and its many variants and their persistence are challenging human existence on a scale the world has not witnessed not even during the World wars. Unlike a war

where the supreme motive is to defeat the opponent, COVID-19 and its variants make everyone a potential enemy. The mode of transmission is such that even family members *must* act with serious caution around each other. For filial expressions like hugging, holding hands, giving peck to take place due sanitation must first be observed. This, no doubt, has introduced new fears into social relations. The fear is to the point that people are gradually losing hope. Kabuk (2020:154) contends that 'the whole wide world is living in tremendous fear due to the unpredictability of the nature of the virus, which the human vulnerability to it is capable of endangering the entire human race.' This 'has caused enormous panic and despair in the minds of the entire humankind' (Kabuk, Umaru and Tanko 2021: 83). In such situation, the need to shore up citizens' morale and provide effective direction in terms of the well-being of people becomes urgent. Government in different places have been committing human and material effort towards combating the disease and its effects. These are in form of welfare and stimulus packages and encouraging people (and even mandating them) to submit to inoculation against the virus. In spite of all these, the psychological issues – depression and persistent feelings of fretfulness that are beyond social and economic consequences (Okolo 2022 pending, Kabuk, Umaru and Tanko 2021; Kabuk 2020) have persisted. This suggests that more is needed to cushion the effect of the pandemic on the general human welfare. Already, Kabuk, Umaru and Tanko (2021:83) identified religion as a tool that can help both with coping with 'the huge effects wielded by the infectious disease' and a source of inspiring 'ultimate optimism in human psyche in the post covid-19 regime.' Equally, Okolo (2022 pending) presents Ubuntu as a philosophy that will help humans to manage the on-going COVID-19 crises and its post era. To these pursuits, this study adds critical thinking as another tool that can be used to face the challenges posed by the persistence of COVID-19. It is the contention of the study that application of critical thinking to COVID-19 can help humanity to cope with its devastation on human psyche, build confidence in the way it is being- and should be handled and provide guidance for handling future challenges that will confront humanity.

Conceptualising Critical thinking

Critical thinking, an important aspect of logic, involves the ability to interrogate life experience, distil from it the right response that fits the particular situation and apply it to that situation. This ability has nothing to do with accumulation of information, the prestige of school attended, number of degrees acquired or the many places visited. Rather it consists in the ability to know what facts are relevant, how to interrogate them and distil what is best suited to a particular situation after carefully weighing benefits and consequences. This requires that our actions and beliefs should be a result of our rational and clear thinking; a critical thinker has to be an active participant in whatever life presents. The implication is that understanding is not limited to the apprehension of the positive aspects of an issue but also the negative ones. That is, to be aware of one's environment in a way that acknowledges both strengths and weaknesses. Richard Paul (1992:9) attributes the disposition of open- and fair-mindedness, inquisitiveness, flexibility, a propensity to seek reason, a desire to be well-informed, and a

respect for and willingness to accommodate diverse viewpoints, suspend judgement and review other perspectives to critical thinking. Critical thinking is crucial because it 'enables one to reassess one's ideas, beliefs, values, norms, etc., through clarification, argument and persuasion' (Okolo 2015:112). For Staniland (1979:4) to be critical of ideas involve subjecting them to rational, impartial, and articulate appraisal to know whether they should be 'reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one's entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer.' In Oluwagbemi-Jacob's (2020:3) view 'critical thinking seeks ways of understanding the mind and then training the intellect so that common errors as prejudice, overgeneralization, common fallacies, self-deception, rigidity and narrow mindedness are minimized.' Distilled in essence, critical thinking helps to process facts in order to form an informed decision. Socrates called attention to its importance in guiding humanity to the best life when he states that an unexamined life is not worth living. Critical thinking, then, is essential in the management of any challenge humans encounter, be it a pandemic like COVID-19.

Brief on COVID-19

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) which started in China on the 31st December, 2019 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 by WHO due to the speed with which it spread to most countries of the world. As at 2021, it has spread throughout the world. It is a highly communicable respiratory disease which an infected person spreads through air droplets that are projected when the person sneezes, coughs or vomits. The droplets could also remain on surfaces and be transmitted through contamination into the inlets of the potential host (World Health Organisation, 2021). Common symptoms associated with the disease are fever, dry cough and fatigue. The elderly and people with poor immune system that allows for faster viral infection progression are more at risk of dying from the virus (Tazib 2020). There are also asymptomatic patients who do not exhibit the symptoms. This poses more challenge in the fight against the disease. Before certified vaccines were announced ready for use, different measures were adopted to flatten the curve of its spread. Among the best health practices recommended include wearing a face mask to cover the mouth and nose, hand hygiene, social distancing, bans on large gatherings, the use of alcohol-base sanitizers, the use of hand gloves, stay at home if a person is not feeling well, and lockdowns. Indeed, to contain its spread at the heat of it in 2020 most countries, including Nigeria, imposed mandatory stay at home orders and lockdowns. Now with the development of certified vaccines government all over the world are encouraging their people (some making it mandatory) to get vaccinated.

All these have introduced serious crises in human life. The devastating effect of the pandemic on human, economic and social life captured in the joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO on 13th October, 2020, is worth quoting in length. According to them:

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the

world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up 132 million by the end of the year. Millions of enterprises face an existential threat. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets....The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and laid bare its fragility. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets...disrupting domestic and international food supply chains...

Even the vaccines come with their own dynamics. There are still not enough to vaccinate the world population. Some countries, especially African countries, are relying on the goodwill of Western countries to donate the vaccine to them. More importantly, the fight to bring the virus under control is still not working. There is a lot of confusion surrounding the efficacy of the vaccine to prevent a person from further contacting the virus, passing it to other people, or even dying from it. In December 2021, South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, contracted the disease even though he was fully vaccinated. A statement from his office, however, maintains that 'vaccination remains the best protection against severe illness and hospitalisation' (*Merco Press*, 2021). Vaccinated people are advised to still observe all the safety protocol, from wearing a face mask to social distancing. The more disturbing issue, however, is the rate at which the virus has been mutating and possibly doubling its transmissibility and, in the process, diminishing the effectiveness of existing vaccines to fight against the latest variants (John Hopkins University 2021). There are Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Omicron. For instance, the Delta was adjudged to be the most contagious and deadly than the earliest versions while the Omicron discovered on November 24, 2021 is considered by WHO as having the power to increase risk of reinfection. Indeed, the reason the British Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, gave for Britain's decision to ban travel from six African countries due to the Omicron was that 'it may be more transmissible than the Delta variant and the vaccines that we currently have may be less effective against it' (*The Times of Israel* 2021). Equally disturbing is the fact that the new COVID-19 infections and even the new variants are from countries that have achieved high rate of vaccination. Moses Idowu's submission as reported by Arogbonlo (2021) is pertinent: 'The state of Israel is fast closing in on a 100% vaccination rate yet it also has some of the highest rate of new infections. India, South Africa, Brazil, and the United Kingdom participated actively in the clinical trials toward the development of vaccines in 2019. Alas, it is in those countries that new and more virulent variants of the virus are now emerging.' Indeed, the latest COVID-19 variant, Omicron, was discovered in South Africa on November 24, 2021. Idowu also notes that in spite of Germany's

impressive record as the country with one the highest vaccination rates in the world (67%), Germany's new case rate has skyrocketed to levels never seen since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The challenge posed by COVID-19 and its variants is helping to unpack challenges posed by the vaccines as well as reveal the preparedness or otherwise of governments to manage crises and guarantee the safety and well-being of their citizens. For instance, how many vaccines will be enough to protect a person? Will the injection of many vaccines into the human system portend any health hazard? The contradictions and confusions suggest that there is no way to state what the long-term effects of COVID-19, its variants and the vaccines will be. For this reason it is essential to apply critical thinking so as to ameliorate any long-term negative consequences as the world grapples to come to terms with the possibility that the virus has come to stay. It is in this connection that this study will interrogate issues relating to COVID-19 using critical thinking as investigative tool.

Analyses: Application of Critical thinking to COVID-19

How can critical thinking help in resolving COVID-19 crises? As already pointed out, from the onset of the pandemic every aspect of human life physical/biological, social, moral, economic, financial, religious, relational and developmental was thrown into crises, forcing a rethinking on established ways of handling issues. The study explores, at least, five ways critical thinking can be applied in resolving some of these issues.

First, critical thinking can be applied in exposing fallacies and bad reasoning. There are so many contradictions and confusion associated with the virus. At its inception it was regarded as "Wuhan" or "Chinese" virus in relation to where it started. By introducing racial connotation to it, it was supposed that it would remain with the Chinese. Events have since proved this wrong. Even at that there are still doubts, even to the point of its authenticity, surrounding issues around it. For instance in Nigeria some people believe that 'the virus does not exist' and instead perceive it as 'a grand ploy by the ruling elites to siphon funds from the public coffers' (Kabuk, Umaru and Tanko 2021:88). Kabuk, Umaru and Tanko (2021:88) see this either 'as a result of the distrust the populace harbour over the years against those in authority', or 'hatched out of sheer ignorance of the masses, since there was no proper orientation or awareness campaigns concerning the nature of the novel influenza.' Other interpretations include the views that the virus is a biological weapon invented by the Chinese government to take control of the global economy; that it is the handiwork of the Satanists and the Illuminati groups to control the world's population and establish a New World Order under one world religion and one world government (Ajibo 2020). Yet, others belief that the virus 'might have been created by Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft Corporation, or was being spread by the 5G wireless technology' and the vaccines are 'the 666 mark of the anti-Christ' (Ade-Adeleye 2020). This is further compounded by enhanced communication (the internet), and 24-hours news channels that place excess information at peoples' disposal. Critical thinking helps to sieve through the marathon

information at one's disposal and trim it to only the cogent ones that are needed in finding solution to whatever that is confronting us. The inability to apply critical thinking at the inception of the virus helped to escalate it. Instead of asking and engaging with issues such as how can China be helped to contain and eliminate the virus? What actions should the rest of the world take in an age of globalisation to ensure that the virus does not reach other places? In event it does, what actions can be employed to nip it in the bud? Instead of asking and taking concrete actions towards this direction the world waited for a virus that emerged in December 2019 to spread to most countries of the world before being declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 by World Health Organisation to begin to implement serious measures. Even in evaluating controversies surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines some critical issues should be weighed such as: has the vaccine undergone all necessary clinical trials that will qualify it to be administered to humans? Is the vaccine such that everyone can take it without adverse effect that will qualify it for compulsory imposition on people? Does the vaccine completely eliminate the chances of getting the virus? If not, to what extent can it offer protection? Are there other possible responses that can contain the virus better? What is stopping efforts towards this direction? This way critical thinking can guide in the choice of the best response to be taken in a particular situation.

Second, critical thinking can be applied in knowledge acquisition needed to combat the virus. Critical thinking makes it possible to explore infinite possibilities. In the life of a nation this is very important, especially as it relates to Africa. So far in the race to produce vaccines to contain the virus, Africa has not demonstrated serious commitment. Instead of focusing on the wide range of possibilities open to her as regards what she can do, most African countries adopt complacent attitude that whatever the continent needs – from vaccine to loans – will be given to her by the West. Such disposition stunts the growth of the continent, rubbing its people of initiative to confront life issues head-on and through consistent rational exploration find the requisite solution. For instance it is telling that since Okonkwo, in Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, mixed herbs to cure his daughter, Ezinma, from acute malaria no serious advancement has been made in this area. Nigeria is instead among the countries waiting for WHO's malaria vaccine. Admittedly, the vaccine was developed in Africa, with strong engagement of African scientists (Whiting 2021). The point, however, is that this is something Africa, especially Nigeria as the giant of Africa, should have initiated and accomplished decades ago without waiting for the prompting of WHO. It is this attitude that has prevented any serious effort to contribute to the cure of COVID-19. Instead the country is at the mercy of foreign donors to acquire vaccine for its citizens. The implication is that there is no guarantee that the citizens will be able to complete the full dose if something happens and the donors are not able to fulfil their promise. Before dismissing this as an absurd proposition one need to reflect on the unimaginable things the world has been forced to endure since COVID-19 came on board. Who would have thought that in the twenty first century there will be a day when countries will close their doors against each other to the point that even a president cannot visit another country; that people, even close associates, will refrain from hugging and even shaking hands; that Catholic Church

famous for its conservative attitude of regarding absence from a Sunday Mass or any holy day of obligation as sin will close shop even on Easter Sunday of 2020 and subsequently modify some long established rituals such as stopping the traditional exchange of handshake that goes with the Priest's prayer of the peace of the Lord on the people. Add to these, the way the world reacted towards African countries with the discovery of Omicron in South Africa in November 2021. The world literally closed its doors to most African countries. Britain, for instance, suspended all flights from South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Botswana (*The Times of Israel* 2021). This clearly demonstrates that Africa needs to rethink its place in the world. With critical thinking Africa does not only have the potential to change, but can also become a major player in the world space, contributing to important debates, providing direction in controversial issues, supplying materials in periods of scarcity, thus changing the current nomenclature of Africa as a dependent continent. In sum, critical thinking helps to build confidence and enhances independence. A nation where the citizens are independent minded will be able to stand on its own given that people are the most critical assets a nation can possess (Okolo 2015).

The third point is linked to the second. A nation that encourages critical thinking will have citizens with active mind capable of synthesising issues in a way that leads to sound judgement which will invariably lead to the promotion of science and democracy. The objectivity required by science cannot be achieved without investment in the culture of critical thinking. This may account for the poor contribution of most African countries in the fight against the virus. The measure of society may well be how well the people, individually and collectively, can assess an issue and find the best solution that fits it. This is because critical thinking makes it possible for citizens to pursue their own thoughts, to discover relations between ideas, to use facts as the bases for developing arguments, to recognise mistakes in reasoning and to use these as the bases for arriving at a well-informed conclusion. For instance, as serious as COVID-19 is by adopting threats to force citizens to get the vaccine discourages critical thinking. Forcing decision on people rubs them of the ability to interrogate the issue and come up with what they believe to be the right response to their situation. The government needs to find out why people are hesitating or not even interested. Kahane (1995:xv) submits that citizens 'who think for themselves, rather than uncritically ingesting what their leaders and others with power tell them, are the absolutely necessary ingredient of a society that is to remain free.' For Oluwagbemi-Jacob (2020:11) 'this awareness of reason, which can be applied in every sphere of our lives not only makes people better citizens but also enhances democracy' given that critical thinking 'enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society (3).' Critical thinking, then, is needed to grow Africa's democracy and promote its scientific culture.

Fourth is the role of critical thinking in self-reflection as a way of meeting the challenges of COVID-19. Critical thinking provides the mental distance needed for self-reflection. More than two millenniums ago Socrates called attention to the importance of critical thinking in guiding humanity to the best life when he urged man to know thyself. Introspection can go a long way to show us the degree of our own

culpability in the things that happen to us. For instance, Africa's blame game needs such self-analysis. It is important for African nations to realise how the decisions they take and the ones they neglect have far-reaching import on the quality of life of their people. A good example is the inability of most African government to develop social infrastructure that will help the people to regain their self-worth and confidence so as to respond to existential challenges and contribute their own quota to issues of global concern like COVID-19. In a country where the citizens lack requisite skills due to poor social environment will find it difficult to contribute to global solutions. It is from this perspective that Nigeria's inability to develop COVID-19 vaccine or any supplementary intervention to the cure of the deadly virus is to be understood. For instance during a reception organised for him by his state governor in December 2021, the American-based Nigerian, Professor Vincent Njar who won the 2021 David J. Ramsay Entrepreneur of the Year Award for his novel discoveries on possible cures for cancer attributed his success to the right environment. Muanya (2021) reports that Njar is acknowledged by world-class scientists as one of the most accomplished medicinal chemists of any cancer centre in the United States. This is a clear pointer that Nigerian government, indeed African nations, need to develop their social infrastructure and put strong institutions in place that will give their people the needed confidence to showcase their potentials. The practice of critical thinking, then, enables a deeper understanding of an issue by interrogating it to reveal the nature of the problem but also the existing and new methods that will provide the needed solution.

Fifth, is the role of critical thinking in providing a common ground for understanding a complex virus like COVID-19. Critical thinking makes it possible and even easy for everyone to relate to any issue under review due to its universal appeal. Thinking is a common attribute of humans. As such, every culture can understand the challenges posed by the virus. However, the ability to think better comes with training in logic that enhances one's ability to make the right decisions (Oluwagbemi-Jacob 2020; Okolo 2015; Ucheaga 2001; Copi 1978). Oluwagbemi-Jacob (2020:11) insists that the 'study of critical thinking makes it possible for humans to be more critical of their attitudes and actions and more appreciative of other people's views and actions.' According to Elder and Paul (2002:xix) 'human beings are what they think. Whatever one is doing, whatever one feels, whatever one wants – all are determined by the quality of one's thinking.' As such exposing citizens to critical thinking to the point that it becomes a way of life is crucial in resolving the challenges posed by COVID-19 and its variants.

Conclusion

In bringing critical thinking and COVID-19 together in a philosophical analysis the study sets out to show the central importance of critical thinking in understanding and managing the different challenges associated with the deadly virus. COVID-19 is an eye opener about how fast things can change. Its many variants are additional facts of how fast things have continued to change. There is no guarantee that this trend will not continue. By placing critical thinking in the mainstream of the issues affecting COVID-19 it becomes easy to take a

comprehensive view of the issues, interrogate different perspectives and shun any interpretation that is presented as given. Critical thinking can function as a rational, conscious activity directed at deciding what to accept or not; what is true, what is probable and the best course of action to take. Both in arriving at a solution and implementing it, its long- and short-term consequences should be evaluated. As such critical thinking can make all the difference in our ability to make intelligent adjustments with the changes and challenges introduced by COVID-19.

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