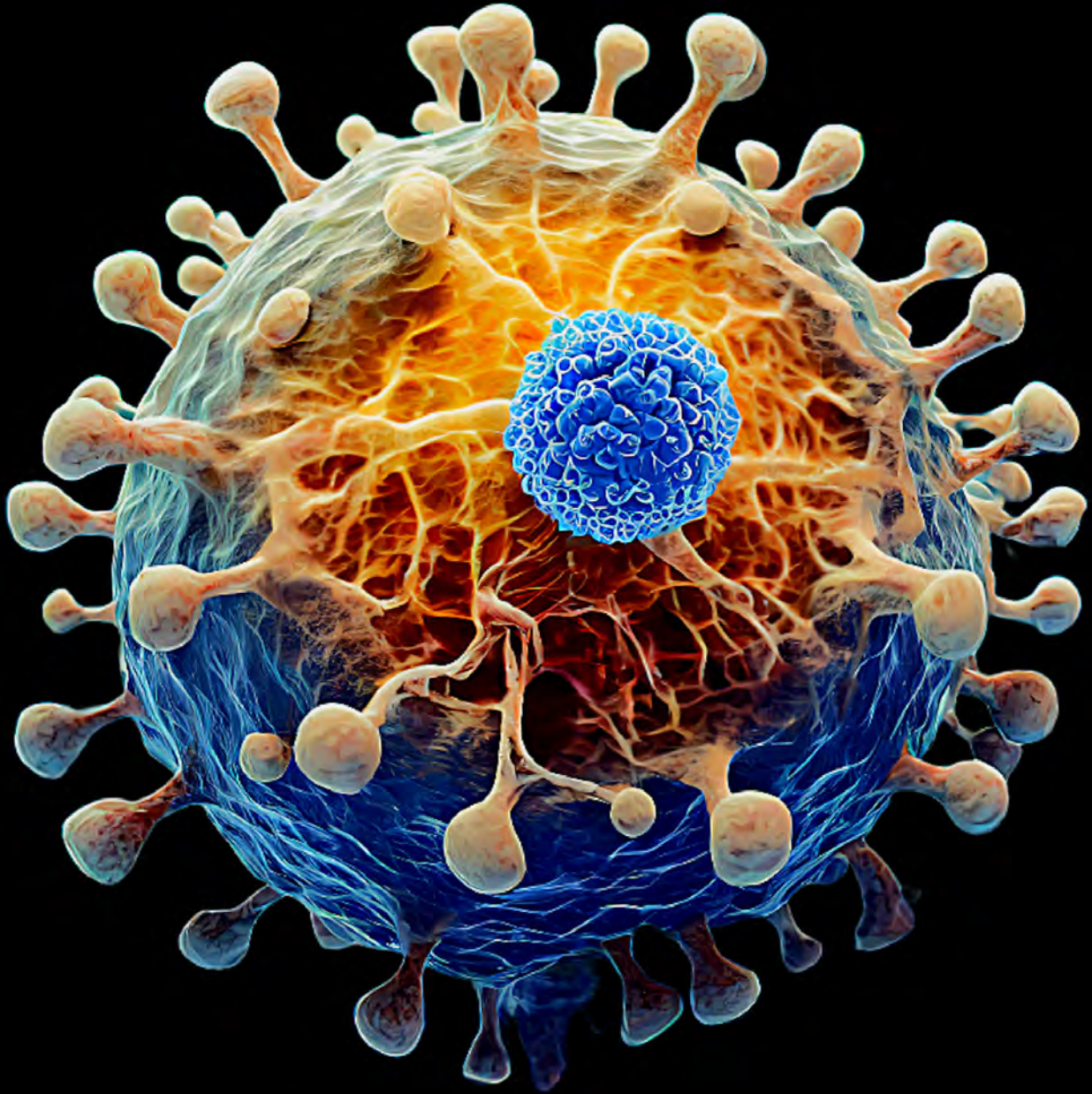
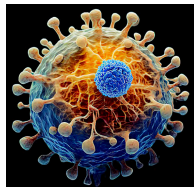


# VIRA



Imaginary Beings;  
three characters walk into a bar

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A One Act Play.

*Imaginary beings: three characters walk into a bar...*

by

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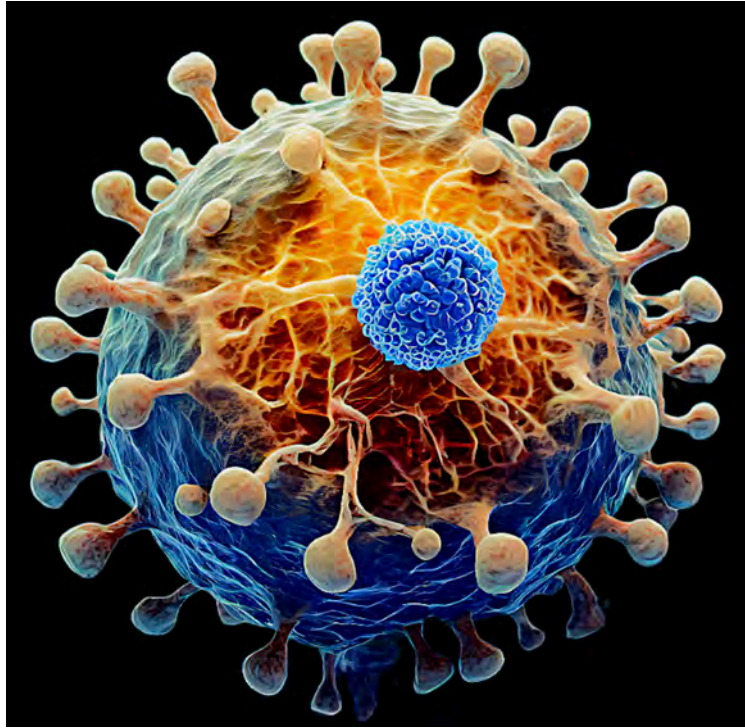
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## **P**relude.

Three characters walk into a bar, a Virus, a Human and Santa Claus. The bar tender refuses to serve the Human and Santa Claus on the basis that he regards them as chimera<sup>1</sup>, but happily serves the Virus with three beakers of industrial alcohol, which the Virus generously shares with his two colleagues.

As the bar is otherwise empty, the bar tender joins them at a table, where a lively discussion ensues in the form of a classical exposition and argumentative discourse designed to test the identity, integrity and sovereignty of each drinker.

This hypothetical scenario seeks to analyse the biological identity and historical constructions that define life, and to trace the genetic exchanges, leakages and seepages that take place between radically divergent species, in

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<sup>1</sup> chimera, in genetics, an organism or tissue that contains at least two different sets of DNA, most often originating from the fusion of as many different zygotes (fertilised eggs). The term is derived from the Chimera of Greek mythology, a fire-breathing monster that was part lion, part goat, and part dragon. Chimeras are distinguished from mosaics, organisms that contain genetically different populations of cells originating from a single zygote, and from hybrids, organisms containing genetically identical populations of cells originating from a cross of two different species. Included among the different known types of animal chimeras are disperjic and twin chimeras, microchimeras, and parthenogenetic and androgenetic chimeras. <https://www.britannica.com/science/chimera-genetics>

particular the incorporation of exogenous genetic material delivered by a virus<sup>2</sup> —the Virus being confident that at least 8% of the Human he sits next to is composed of the DNA of ancient retroviruses that have infected the germ cells (eggs and sperm) of the Human species over the course of millions of years.

The scientist might well ask the Virus if it is a living or non-living being, since it cannot reproduce independently, only within the cell of a living entity. In the same manner the Virus might also turn his attention to the jolly and extremely palpable figure of Santa Claus and ask the same question.

Santa Claus would have to respond that despite the many historical claims to his authentic identity<sup>3</sup>, his existence is only reproduced in the minds of young humans propelled with the assistance of entities such as the Coca Cola Corporation of America<sup>4</sup>. In his defence Santa might propose that in spite of this, he is just as real, in fact even more real, than the Virus, in consideration of the profound effect that he has over human behaviour, belief systems and relationships—after all, he can cite the fact that more people believe in him than the reality of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

In a nutshell the paper intertwines biological and genetic '*realities*' with constructs of the human imaginary, in an attempt to tease out the ever blurry outlines of existence identity, and belief systems.

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<sup>2</sup> Retroviruses comprise over 8% of the human genome (1, 2). Human endogenous retroviruses (HERVs) exist as DNA remnants of infections that occurred in germ lineage cells of our ancestors. Most of this viral DNA is mutated, often including various large disruptions, but some components are intact or otherwise functional.

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1603569113>

<sup>3</sup> Saint Nicholas was a 4th-century Greek Christian bishop of Myra in the region of Lycia in the Roman Empire, (Turkey). Nicholas was known for his generous gifts to the poor, in particular presenting the three impoverished daughters of a pious Christian with dowries so that they would not have to become prostitutes.

<sup>4</sup> Contemporary images of a rotund bearded man dressed in red (with white trimmings) originate in the early 20th century, appearing on several covers of Puck magazine. Shortly thereafter he undergoes a genetic transformation and is associated with beverages - initially as a red and white Santa to sell White Rock Beverages mineral water in 1915 and then in advertisements for its ginger ale in 1923. In the 1930 the graphic artist Haddon Sundblom, depicted Santa for The Coca-Cola Company's Christmas advertising and following suite Coca-Cola's competitor ,Pepsi-Cola used similar Santa Claus paintings in its advertisements in the 1940s and 1950s.

## ACT I SCENE 1

*Scene: The Bar L.U.C.A.*

Somewhere in a utopian European democracy. The three characters walk up to the Bar L.U.C.A, where the painted sign above the entrance reads”

*We serve pure spirit to the biologically pure.*

### **CHARACTER # 1: CARLOS.**

Carlos the Bartender. Young, affable and efficient. He also delivers asides as the narrator.

### **CHARACTER # 2: EVE.**

Eve, a human, identified as female, a biologist; smart, analytical and straight talking—but inclusive in her manner.

### **CHARACTER # 3: SANTA CLAUS.**

Santa Claus, representing his many roles and traditions.

### **CHARACTER # 4: VIRA, a VIRUS**

Vira, an example of the most prolific of all life-forms and possibly a representative of the oldest life form (certainly the oldest in the bar).

### **Apologia:**

No part of this text was created or assisted by AI Chat-bots and no animals were harmed in this production.

*Direction—The bartender greets them, but simultaneously gives them the once over.*

**CARLOS:**

Good evening friends and welcome, but before I can serve you I'm obliged by EU laws to check your biometrics with a retinal scan

*Direction—Carlos whips out an electronic iris reader, and then one by one they lean forward to squint into the device.*

I trust this will not inconvenience you—it is part of the new EU Migration and Border Protection policy.

**EVE:**

That sounds horribly familiar!

**CARLOS:**

They say it's for the common good.

**EVE:**

That sounds even more familiar!

*Direction—When Carlos has scanned each of the visitors he turns toward the virus.*

**CARLOS:**

Vira; I'm happy to serve you, but I'm afraid that your friend with the earrings and leather jacket is out of the question, her DNA is completely scrambled. It is difficult to determine what in fact it is!

And the other one with the red outfit and beard, well frankly there is no trace of cellular life or DNA whatsoever—it would seem to be a complex arrangement of memes and historical context. It does however appear to be highly adapted to profound cold—a new species of extremophile perhaps?

**CARLOS:**

But Listen—As it is a quiet night and I don't want to spoil your evening, I'm happy to serve you—and then you can just pass the drinks along to your companions.

**VIRA:**

Good, well make that, a double shot of methyl alcohol for myself and two doubles of ethanol for my friends, thanks.

*Direction—The three sit at the table—and as the bar is virtually empty, the bartender, pours himself, a drink and joins the three in conversation.*

**SANTA CLAUS:**

*Direction—Santa Claus turns to the bartender with a smile.*

So you must be Luca young man?

**CARLOS:**

*Direction—Carlos returns his smile, but shakes his head.*

No my name is Carlos, but I am a **L.U.C.A.**

**SANTA CLAUS:**

*Direction—Santa Claus frowns quizzically.*

**CARLOS:**

L.U.C.A. is the last universal common ancestor to all living things on earth, so cousin to everyone, except to you perhaps! You may recall what Darwin said in the “Origin of Species.”

*Therefore, I should infer from analogy, that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on earth have descended from one primordial form into which life was first breathed.*

Well—I’m one of them!

**EVE:**

I simply love the last sentence of his book:

*There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms—or into one*

*Direction — Eve turning to Santa.*

But he has a point there Santa, no DNA, no deal. Our friend, the barkeep here, regards you as a figment of the collective imagination.

**SANTA CLAUS:**

*Direction — Santa Claus huffs and puffs.*

Well I may have a complicated history, but as you know, I am as authentic as anyone here. I am a replicating entity just like you Eve—Its just that I don't—well—*do it*—like you!

And like you Vira, I have hosts—my existence is reproduced in the minds of young humans—with a small nudge from their parents, toy manufacturers, and not to forget the Coca Cola Corporation of America. But you are, of course, an uninvited guest—and one with very poor domestic etiquette, I understand!

**VIRA:**

But Santa that means you are an empty sign, a simple vehicle with no independent agency and no intentionality.

**SANTA CLAUS:**

In my defence I would propose that I am just as real—in fact even more real, than the average Virus—just think about the profound effect that I exert over human behaviour, belief systems and relationships—after all, statistically more people believe in me than the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and no-one accuses me of being fake-news.

As you know I have a long and complicated cultural history, in the 4th-century I was known as Saint Nicholas, the Greek Christian bishop of Myra. But even before that at home in the Northlands I was the leader of the Wild Hunt each Yuletide—then my nickname was Odin. Actually my real name is Sinter-Klauss, too hard for Americans to say apparently. Anyway everyone knows me, and everyone loves me—so proof enough. And just remember—no-one vaccinates against Santa.



**VIRA:**

Ugh!—Vaccines are a pain in the Butt!

*Direction — Vira turns to address Eve.*

**VIRA:**

Eve, your crew are always trying to put me out of business, thankfully with little success.

**EVE:**

Well with your name why wouldn't we.

You forget your Latin, *Virus*, a poison; or a slimy liquid!

*Direction — Vira shrugs and turns to Santa Claus.*

**VIRA:**

And you Santa are the new kid on the block in more than one way. To start with the 4<sup>th</sup> Century is just a moment ago if you consider our L.U.C.A. friend here—Carlos; how old are you exactly?

**Carlos:**

*Direction — Carlos smiling.*

It's my Four-Billionth birthday next month—it's going to be a big party, why don't you all come along!

**VIRA:**

Almost as old as me—I thought I recognised you, we must have crossed paths over the years, maybe you played host to me once or twice before?

*Direction — Vira turning back to Santa Claus.*

Santa—secondly I admit that genes maybe selfish. Mea Culpa—I am mostly DNA with a nice protein and lipid overcoat—I really only have one objective, and that is to reproduce myself, and in that I am similar to all cellular life.

And I admit that you and I both require a host to replicate but as I have stated before—you contain no essential code or script, a meme is simply a vehicle, a

degenerate sign—whose only merit is the ability to be transcribed and transmitted, a delivery-man who doesn't know what's in the packages!

**SANTA CLAUS:**

Well all I can do is to quote T.H. Huxley who in 1880 said:

*The struggle for existence holds as much in the intellectual, as in the physical world. A theory of species of thinking, and its right to exist, is coextensive with its power of resisting extinction by its rivals.*

Vira, try and see it this way, you function blindly in this world—without sentience—your only real plan is to continue to exist and evade extinction by random mutation.

**Eve:**

Well said Santa—Vira, in my profession we describe you as being On the *Edge of Life*—in a limbo state, not quite inanimate, but also not quite alive—you can reproduce, mutate and evolve, but not independently, as you have no metabolism—your propagate by hijacking the metabolism of the cells in another organism.

**VIRA:**

Instead of being on the *Edge of Life* I consider that I *Live on the Edge*—and being small I don't take up *Too Much Space!*

Although in terms of the biosphere, we Viruses actually take up a huge amount of space, more than the rest of you put together. You could say that we are the *First Nations* of the Earth!

Your profession Eve, in fact your species, might benefit from a bit of navel gazing—as it would appear that the average human DNA contains up to 8% of retroviruses from ancient viral infections.

And more—your bodies are home to 30 trillion human cells—but also another 39 trillion bacterial cells—not to mention all of those Fungi and Archaea.

All considered you are about 43% human—and 57% us! This clearly points to the DNA fingerprint of L.U.C.A. You are, as Carlos discovered, a mishmash, a *Mestito*—I am the only thoroughbred here!

Ironically this is the reason that your species is so Xenophobic—obsessed with Race and Ethnicity. It's in your DNA, so to speak!

**EVE:**

I resent that, you are talking to the most highly evolved species on the planet!

**VIRA:**

Really, one that shares 60% of its DNA with a Banana! and 60% with a Fruit-fly; or perhaps you would prefer 84% shared with a Dog—90% with a Mouse and 98.8% with the Great Apes! Even your Neanderthal cousins had bigger brains than you—so what's all the fuss about!

**SANTA CLAUS:**

Whoa Vira; let us not forget our sense of decorum and goodwill. We concede that you are possibly one of—or *the* original inhabitant of Earth—but *live and let live* my friend—after all you need Eve, but I am not sure that Eve really needs you! And she, of course, can claim that she is both Sentient and Sapient—qualities that elude you!

Vira, I counsel you to avoid the superficial distinction that asserts genes are biological units of information, and function in an entirely different manner to memes, which are cultural units of information. To me they seem equivalent in terms of their capacity to reproduce and evolve within the human population.

This distinction simply reinforces a false nature/nurture dichotomy, and is an underestimation of the *kinetic* effects of memes. Memes do not just circulate between teenagers on social media; they are biochemically instantiated in the human brains that they inhabit. Memes affect human behaviour in dramatic ways—and can change the course of history.

Religion is a case in point—where memes are a political force that eventually harden into dogma, evolving into life changing and life terminating forms of bigotry and conflict.

*Direction — Vira addressing Santa Claus.*

**VIRA.**

So my friend you are now claiming a functional role in biology and evolution, that's pretty rich for an advertising campaign poster-boy! Let's take all that with a pinch of salt and get back to Sentience.

Sentience is a rather loose cultural term. Does the fact that I can navigate toward a host organism and wriggle into a host cell not indicate that I have the ability to sense my environment? Or do you suggest that I am merely programmed to do this—like some automatic *Rational-Agent*, rigidly structured with a code of Beliefs, Desires; and Intentions? Flying blind for the past few billion years!

Flying blind Santa is something that sounds much more like your capers! Superficially you are structured to appear Sentient and Sapient. You pretend to promote well-being, and kindness by fabricating a magical collective celebration. But under close scrutiny your simulation of human attributes is a pure construct—driven by commercial avarice; just a jumble of false narratives designed to numb the mind to the harsh realities of life. In essence your meme structure allows evil to masquerade as good.

As far as Sapience goes—I have no real need of it. Why would I require self-awareness or spend energy on subjective perceptual experiences. My aims are very well defined, I replicate; I mutate and evolve; I succeed—when it comes down to it—does Eve's tribe really do anything more than this?

**CARLOS:**

My senior, Vira; speaks with the wisdom of age—before Vira arrived on Earth, frozen inside the core of an Ice-Comet, everything on the planet was inert—just a soupy mix of organic chemicals. Vira's arrival changed all of that, and over time—well we all know what happened; things like Bananas and Eve appeared.

Sooner or later Eve started to project phantoms like Santa, who are gullible enough to believe in their own existence, and in turn these phantoms have infected the minds of Eve's tribe, to the point where it is almost impossible to separate fact from fantasy.

**VIRA:**

Finally an accurate definition of the Human character!

**CARLOS:**

On that conclusive note I will bring you all a final round—a Methylated double and two Ethanol doubles—right? But before I go, I am curious Vira, how do you see the future; as a representative of the largest biome on Earth? What's the plan?

**VIRA:**

To be frank—and Eve I do not care if this causes offence—as in any case I lack Sapience so why should I care.

This planet is infected and despoiled—it obviously needs a complete reset. So my colleagues and I are working hard on a method to reduce the capacity and agency of Eve's species. This planetary counter-offensive is structured as an expanding series of pandemics that will gradually erode their cognitive abilities, leaving them about two percent less capable than their cousins the Great Apes—putting them at about two billion years before the discovery of fire.

This is our plan for a global equilibrium.

**SANTA CLAUS:**

In terms of happiness, you may have something there Vira—I'll drink to that!

**CURTAIN.**

*Imaginary Beings; three characters walk into a bar...* is the initial component of the VIRA Project, undertaken in collaboration with the Instituto de Medicina Molecular, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal.

