



The Covid crisis: “A wake-up call” to what?¹

David M. Black

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.
 –Einstein.

The Covid crisis has been so much discussed that it's difficult to address it without falling instantly into cliché. Clearly, the initial response to it has to confront the immediate practical issue: how to limit infections and the death rate and protect the population, and yet keep the economy functioning so that essential services continue and businesses and jobs are enabled to survive: how to “get through the crisis”, in a word, with minimal destruction. This is the urgent and necessary issue, and many people, eager to get back to normal, might say it's the only issue. That would be a perfectly understandable response.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, from some people we have heard a different reaction. They have not in any way sought to minimise the seriousness of the crisis. But they have wanted to look beyond the immediate disasters, and to say that there is something in this crisis that we need to learn from. When they speak of the Covid crisis, they use some phrase like: “it gives us our last chance”, or “it's a wake-up call!”

I'd like in this paper to look at the question of what this might mean – “a wake-up call” to what? And if a wake-up call is often an alarming event, warning us that if we don't attend to *this* alarm, something considerably more alarming will occur – then what might that greater danger be?

Seen in this perspective, the “wake-up call” is to see the pandemic as yet another symptom of the sickness that humanity is inflicting on the earth. Our huge success as a species, signalled by the increase of the human population from about one billion two hundred years ago, to nearly eight billions today, is coming at a cost we will not be able to afford. Climate change will not end in some single moment of operatic catastrophe, like the biblical Apocalypse. To borrow a phrase from Flavelle and Moran (2020), it will be “a relentless grind of overlapping disasters, major and minor”. The process is already clearly under way. Covid 19 is merely one disaster. It joins the others we are increasingly seeing: gigantic wildfires, more frequent droughts, floods and hurricanes, melting ice-caps, rising sea-levels, vanishing populations of bees, butterflies and insects generally, ever-increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees ... The pandemic is unusual only because it has gone beyond being a shocking local event and has become the first of these disasters to affect every country on the planet.

So here is one thing this wake-up call is alerting us to. We are not really asleep about climate-change, we are only pretending, but a good alarm can be extremely helpful in reminding us that the price of pretence, too – the price of self-deception – will be a high one.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given on 19 September 2020 at a conference by the Freud Museum and Free Associations, *Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere: Social Fault Lines*.

But if we listen more closely to this wake-up call, we discover that we can't stop there. Global climate change and global ecocide are not happening all by themselves, by some sort of automatism. By what at first glance seems a coincidence, international agitation about the pandemic was suddenly impacted in May 2020 by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a black man cruelly and publicly murdered by a white policeman. International outrage, the Black Lives Matter movement, erupted all around the globe, the demonstrations often interfering with security precautions to control the pandemic. Very remarkably, many people, responding to Black Lives Matter, spoke of the murder in a deep historical perspective, linking it to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which started in the 16th century, and to European imperialism, at its height in the 19th century. To learn the lesson of the pandemic, we will need to follow their example.

The over-arching question is whether the challenges of the modern world can be adequately addressed by tackling each of them individually. If you think they can, then you will see Covid-19 as one challenge, climate change another, racism and misogyny another, populism and authoritarianism another, lying and fake news another, refugees and displacements of peoples another – and you will say that's the right way to deal with them, to address each individually. This is the approach of virtually all politicians, and most of the media. The alternative is to think that there is something systemic going on: that these many potential disasters are all symptoms of something less obvious. Of course they do need to be addressed, each in its own terms: that goes without saying. Symptoms create emergencies, which have to be confronted, and “identity politics” will always be necessary to address specific injustices such as prejudice against particular groups. But psychoanalysis came into being as an attempt to discern what stands behind symptoms: to remember that, where there are many external “symptoms”, there may be underlying organising psychological processes. If so, if lasting change is to occur, something else needs to be identified, at a deeper level than the symptoms, and perhaps quite different in kind from the symptoms.

Such considerations may sound academic, but they have major practical implications. The Harvard scientists currently seeking to conduct geo-engineering experiments, seeding calcium carbonate dust into the high stratosphere (*Economist*, 2021), are concerned with what they rightly see as an important problem, namely the trapping of heat by greenhouse gases in the lower atmosphere. The consequences of focusing so narrowly on the single issue, however, are potentially extremely dangerous, and they are strongly opposed by environmental bodies like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, who are attempting to think more responsibly and on a larger scale.

As the Black Lives Matter people realised, “thinking on a larger scale” includes “thinking on a larger scale historically.” The 19th century is crucial if we are to understand the world we live in today, and why it's in so many perils. I shall not be able to make any adequate historical argument in a short paper. And one would certainly need to look much deeper than the 19th century to understand the strange movement of thought that broke apart Christianity, in Dante's day (late Middle Ages) a religion of integration which believed God “loved the world” and took human form in order to do something helpful, and turned it instead into a religion in which God and nature were at odds, in which people “pretty nearly all day long/ are doing something rather wrong” as Belloc wryly phrased it. The estrangement of God and

nature was given philosophical respectability by Descartes, who formulated a dualism in which nature was mere “extended stuff”, *res extensa*, mindless and mechanical by definition, and consciousness was a “thinking thing”, *res cogitans*, existing in some different dimension. Nature, conceived on this model, came to seem to get along with no need for the mind, or for subjectivity, at all. Two hundred years after Descartes, in the 19th century, a vision of human life began to take root in Europe, which for the first time in human history replaced a religious account of what we are here for – usually in Europe a Christian or Jewish account – with a solely materialist and mechanistic account, often dignified by being called scientific. That's to say: an ontological story of a solely material universe replaced a vision founded in wonder and the recognition of ethical value. The heart-breaking list of creatures harried to extinction or near-extinction by human action began to lengthen alarmingly – the passenger pigeon, the wild turkey, the wild bison, the dodo, the red rail, the Mascarene coot....²

There were of course powerful drivers of this change. The spectacular successes of scientific thinking – in medicine and surgery, in productivity and transport, in enhancing the destructive power of weapons, in re-conceiving many fascinating questions like the depth of time, the history of the solar system, and the evolution of life – carried all before them. Even psychoanalysis was born in that euphoria. Europe's triumphant imperialism carried its values all over the globe: in a famous phrase, “we had the Gatling gun and they had not.” In that vast upsurge of power, greed, confidence, and unmistakably efficacious technological knowhow, the myth of progress, the myth of European superiority, and the myth of scientific materialism, were all born as if in a single birth, and all presented themselves in a curious way as embodying some kind of admirable virtue. Kipling captured one of the tones of imperial victimhood perfectly, when he wrote in 1899, at the very summit of the 19th century:

Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need....

– And Kipling's was one of the more humane voices of European colonialism.

For those with clear eyes, the First World War brought these myths crashing down. The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, who fought in the trenches and was seriously wounded at the Battle of Arras, wrote that, when he returned to Oxford in 1919: “I brought a mind that had become deeply sceptical of the principles underlying the European civilization in which I had been brought up, and which had issued in the savage destruction and stupid waste in which I had played my part” (Costello 2002, 60). He saw the gigantic carnage of the War as the direct outcome of the false values of greed, imperialism, individualism and competition that had dominated the European nations. The phrase “toxic masculinity” didn't then exist, but if it had it would have offered him a nice way to summarise his point.

“Very deep is the well of the past,” said Thomas Mann. “Should we not call it bottomless?” When we reflect on these false values, we are bound to notice they have been the prevailing theme throughout human history. The psychologist Paul Gilbert

² I borrow this list, as I also borrow the Einstein quote I use as an epigraph, from Elizabeth Kolbert's unsettling, satirical, and deeply humane book, *Under a White Sky* (2021).

has suggested that they acquired their force when the Neolithic Revolution, usually dated to around 8000 BCE in Mesopotamia, led to the development of agriculture and settled communities (2010, 52). This was the time when human beings ceased to live in the ancestral evolutionary environment of small nomadic family groups, all members knowing each other extremely well, and began to live instead in much larger groupings, vulnerable to, and easily subjugated by, forceful and greedy individuals almost invariably male. Gilbert suggests that this was the point at which the crucial value of "compassion" or sympathy was lost as the common regulating mode in human interaction, and – although it never of course disappeared entirely – it was increasingly replaced by emotions relating to the more objective facts of power and possession: emotions including fear, greed, suspicion, envy, and also admiration for forcefulness, domination and rule-imposition. Later, in a counter-movement, thinkers in what Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age (defined by Jaspers as about 800-200 BCE, but there's no need to be rigid about it – it includes Plato, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, and Confucius, and extends to Jesus Christ) saw very clearly the damagingness of these values, and attempted to teach alternatives. Despite the considerable appeal, and often significant local success, of these alternatives, the "toxic" values of domination and greed have repeatedly returned and prevailed.

However we conceive the deeper history, and for all the insights and good intentions of many people like John Macmurray after World War One, they continue to do so. They have re-surfaced in many forms: in Fascism and Stalinism in the 1930s, in the neoliberalism and hyper-capitalism that have dominated the developed world since the 1980s, in the rise of unscrupulous dictatorships all around the planet in recent years, and in the carefully contrived mess of greed, lies, and xenophobic hatreds that we have seen recently in the political worlds of Britain and the US. These recent developments have not happened by chance. Naomi Klein quotes the influential advocate of free markets, Milton Friedman, who said in 1982: "Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable" (Klein 2021).

Ever since, often with the aid of think-tanks and professorial chairs funded by billionaires (Mayer 2017), free-market and small-government ideas have been kept "lying around", to be propagated energetically in times of crisis, when people are especially vulnerable to the appeal of "strong leadership" and simple stories. For example, after the 2008 global financial crisis, the Cameron government adroitly and quite falsely blamed the problem on Labour profligacy. This story became the justification for years of "austerity" that fulfilled a neoliberal ideological programme, undermining the humane provisions of the welfare state, and benefiting the established owners of private capital. Such systematic and motivated lying, "controlling the narrative", has been deliberate policy. The "big lie", the use of organised campaigns of lying, is now used routinely by unscrupulous fractional interests, for example by the fossil-fuel industry to deny the reality of climate change or by Trump supporters to deny the reality of Biden's victory in the 2020 Presidential election. This has nothing to do with living in a "post-truth era"; it has everything to do with the adoption of unscrupulous techniques of organised lying – not exactly new, of course, but increasingly sophisticated, often borrowing ideas from the advertising industry. Naomi Klein describes how, when the power-supply in Texas failed earlier this year in a freak spell of freezing weather, local politicians promptly announced it

was the fault of the Green New Deal – a policy completely without relevance to the inadequately maintained infrastructure that was causing the problem, but one which, for quite other reasons, senior figures in fossil-fuel burning Texas were eager to discredit.

“The price of freedom”, we are told, “is constant vigilance.” Even apart from crises, constant vigilance is a demanding state of mind, and in times of moderate prosperity people understandably would rather be entertained than reminded that serious decisions require careful and informed attention. This is why democracy is an extremely dangerous form of government: it depends on an electorate who are willing to think seriously and consistently, and vote responsibly, and that in turn depends on a sound education system, on media that at least attempt to tell the truth, and on ethical teaching that emphasises the seriousness of the harm done by greed and prejudice. None of these conditions is easily met, and the rise of social media, and of cynically and systematically biased public media (often, once again, owned by billionaires), has made them recently even harder to meet than formerly.

There is a paradox here which is worth spelling out. The word *democracy* has come to be used as if it named a virtue. Those who opposed Brexit in the UK, after the 2016 referendum, were accused of being “undemocratic.” But democracy does not name a virtue: it is simply a way of reaching a decision, and if voters are intimidated, seduced, or comprehensively “disinformed”, it can produce very bad decisions indeed. The American Framers knew this when they inserted an Electoral College between the voting public and the Presidency. They wanted to protect the Republic from the danger of bad decisions by its citizens – not foreseeing that the elevation of democracy into a virtue would forbid the Electoral College to contradict the public vote.

In a somewhat similar way, the word *freedom* has also been elevated into seeming to name a virtue. Certain specific freedoms – freedom of choice, freedom of speech – have been asserted as if they should have no limit. Admirable within bounds, these freedoms have been exploited to licence the very dangerous accumulation of vast wealth in irresponsible private hands, and for the systematic creation of sections of the population, “demographics”, who are so bamboozled by slogans, lies and misinformation that they become vulnerable to believing complete nonsense (such as, at the time of writing, the QAnon conspiracy theories).

But I don't want to speak only like Jeremiah, scolding the nations for their sinfulness. There are some hopeful signs. One of them is the evolution of psychoanalysis. It was born on the crest of the wave of nineteenth century optimism about materialism and progress, and its founder famously described himself as at heart a *conquistador*, one of those reckless Europeans who annexed a new continent. But over its first century psychoanalysis became something different; it came to emphasise that human beings emerge into their fullest reality, not by playing out childish fantasies of autonomy, conquest, and “greatness”, but in the ethical and down-to-earth recognition of inter-dependence and relatedness. Jonathan Lear summarised the fundamental question asked by Hans Loewald: “What would it be to take seriously the thought that within the human realm love is a developmental force?” (Lear 2017, 178). To take such a thought seriously moves one in an altogether different direction from admiration for autonomy and dominance. “The concept of an isolated individual mind is a theoretical fiction,” say Robert Stolorow and George Atwood (1991, 193). The necessary companion of psychology, neurobiology,

confirms this insight. As Daniel Siegel puts it: “The brain is a social organ” (2011, 211), its physical structure actively shaped by the relationships and the emotional experience of the subject. This understanding of brain-structure has emerged only since the 1980s, and it does so as our understanding of nature in general moves toward a larger recognition of the universality of inter-connection and mutual dependence, and of the mind, far from existing in some separate, abstract space as Descartes described, as emerging wholly in dependency on its relations with others and on reciprocities within a widely inter-connected ecological system.

Here we can sense the beginning of an altogether different way of thinking from that of the nineteenth century, a “vision”, entirely responsible in terms of the legitimate requirements of science, but having the ability to connect as well with the domain of meaning and with the profound values glimpsed by the thinkers of the Axial Era. When people say that the Covid pandemic is a “wake-up call”, I think what they are glimpsing, with whatever degree of conscious awareness, is that the arrival of Covid-19 is one of the ever-more-strident signals we are receiving that humanity is called on to change radically, to awaken to the foundational fact of inter-dependency, both at the level of the planetary ecosystem and at the level of human society. This fact of interdependence, of what the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has called “inter-being”, points also to the profoundly truth-telling nature of the ethical values we perceive spontaneously when we allow ourselves to attend to reactions of sympathy and compassion. These include the fundamental ethical values of justice, equality, and kindness.

This vision is in no way new, but the dangers of ignoring it have never been so plain to see as they are now. Humanity is called on, if it wishes to survive, to make a change comparable to an evolutionary mutation. But biology won't do the job for us, and evolution will have no scruple about causing the extinction or decline of yet another malfunctioning species. If we wish to survive in some decent human shape, it can only be as the outcome of thought and conscious decisions. We do, however, now have the knowledge that could enable us to make such decisions more wisely, partly – we may congratulate ourselves – partly thanks to psychology and neuroscience. But we shouldn't congratulate ourselves too noisily: our insights are still affecting only a very small proportion of the world's population, and astonishingly enough as I write they are in retreat in the UK where a right-wing government, caught up in the bombast of “exceptionalism”, is increasing its stockpile of nuclear weapons, and, caught up in naive excitement about “science”, is withholding funding from education in the humanities. It is also, at a time of widespread global need, reducing its contribution to international aid.

The “mutation” to a responsible and ethical vision will not, of course, by itself solve the many problems here described as “symptoms.” Things have gone much too far, and there will need to be carefully thought-out legal and technological solutions, and international cooperation of an unprecedented kind, if our grandchildren are to reach maturity in a bearable and still beautiful world. But the “mutation” can offer coherent values, and a meaningful direction of travel. Without it, it is hard to foresee anything different from what we see in the present pandemic: a hasty, perhaps brilliant deployment of ingenuity to cope with a current crisis – in this case to develop vaccines – and behind it the frightening and relentless grind of ever larger and more unmanageable disasters looming on the horizon.

It's sobering to reflect that what is said here has, broadly, been foreseen for decades. Let me end by quoting an earlier psychoanalyst who took the risk of speaking seriously about ethical matters:

The over-riding issue is the creation not of a new ideology but of a universal ethics growing out of a universal technological civilization. This can be advanced only by men and women who are neither ideological youths nor moralistic old men, but who know that from generation to generation the test of what you produce is the care it inspires. If there is any chance at all, it is in a world more challenging, more workable, and more worthy of respect than all myths, retrospective or prospective: it is in historical reality, at last ethically cared for. (Erikson 1968, 260).

That was Erik Erikson, writing more than fifty years ago, giving us the exact same wake-up call that we can now hear from the coronavirus. “*Historical reality, at last ethically cared for.*” That states well the change our present predicament requires of us.

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David M. Black is a Scottish writer and psychoanalyst, the editor of *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century* (Routledge 2006) and author of *Why Things Matter: the place of values in science, psychoanalysis and religion* (Routledge 2011). His translation and commentary on Dante's Purgatorio is due out later this year in the NYRB Classics series.