Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain
AHP new vistas MAGAZINE
AHPB Magazine for *Self & Society* | No. 7 - Summer 2021

Confessions of a Covidiot

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> It's about getting down for what you stand for.[1]
>
> Earl Simmons (*aka* DMX)

One of my favourite rappers, DMX, died this year. On the day it happened, I found myself swapping memories with an old friend; reliving our teenage years, reminding ourselves of his music. In the midst of a global pandemic which has claimed the lives of so many, it felt almost wrong to be commemorating an artist whose actions in life were highly questionable, and death – a cocaine-induced heart attack[2] – sadly predictable.

But the thing is, everyone dies. Lovers, haters, saviours, traitors; we all wind up making the plants grow. And I know that can feel upsetting, pointless even, but I find that history, not headlines, does wonders to heal this rift with reality. I clearly recall, about a decade ago, abandoning the pile of Year 7 creative writing assignments that had invaded my living room and, instead, reading Montefiore's *Titans of History* in a single day.[3] That evening, I felt strangely peaceful. Each short chapter is dedicated to a different historical figure, and every one – from Albert Einstein to Attila the Hun – ends the same way: they died. Indeed, it's rather a miracle that we're here at all. As Richard Dawkins puts it:

> We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the grains of sand in Arabia.[4]

This, Dawkins explains, is the ordinary statistics of causation. But there's more. 'The universe is older than a hundred million centuries', he continues. 'Every century of hundreds of millions has been in its time, or will be when the time comes, "the present century."' This is known as the 'moving present'. Despite these 'stupefying odds', Dawkins invites us to notice that we are, in fact, very much alive and in the process of reading his book, just as you are alive and reading *these* words, right now.

In China, a central theme of Daoism is the idea that in nature, all opposites are inseparable and mutually dependent: life and death, day and night, sky and earth. 'Let reality be reality', said the ancient philosopher Lao Tzu – words which reflect the key principle of *wu-wei*, or doing nothing. I am not a Daoist, but these ideas make sense to me. It is summer as I write this article about my decision not to take the vaccine for the respiratory illness Covid-19; a decision which seems to baffle some and enrage others. You, too, may not like my choice (although there's surely some satisfaction in knowing that the element of choice may soon be removed?). If you think the vaccine is 'our way out of this', if you believe that access to healthcare is a human

right, and if you would like to imagine that vaccination significantly reduces contagion, then let's acknowledge that we are starting our conversation from different viewpoints. Luckily, though, this article isn't about vaccinology, or even the legitimacy of public-health restrictions. Rather, it's about being human, being lost, and groping forward in the dark.

It bothers me that vaccines are tested on animals. Admittedly, the drastic acceleration of procedures culminating in the likes of Paul McCartney posting jab-selfies on Instagram with the caption 'BE COOL. GET VAX'D', little more than a year after the first European outbreak, means that the level of animal experimentation in response to Covid-19 is very low compared with, say, the decades of suffering through clinical trials which have taken place in the search for an AIDS/HIV vaccine. Indeed, back in 2020, faced with the repeated failure of animal trials to trigger a decent immune response as well as mounting pressure to make a Covid vaccine 'happen', the International Coalition of Medicines Regulatory Authorities (ICMRA) dismantled standard scientific practice with the verdict that efficacy tests in animal-challenge models were *not* needed to progress to human trials.[5]

But that's all beside the point. What I find I can't swallow is the basic premise that other species (and, with excruciating parallels, other human populations) exist purely to be exploited for 'our' benefit. When I say this aloud, I'm often laughed at. It is hard to explain to these people that our tyrannical approach to the natural world is rooted in the bleak, human-centric philosophy of the Judeo-Christian religions that maintain a stranglehold on our cultural imagination; that no rainforest culture has ever produced such a perverted form of spirituality. Just consider, for example, the extraordinary similarity between the UK government's handling of the pandemic (in 2020, for example, Rishi Sunak ruled out a rise in fuel duty, supposedly as a measure to help the poorest families) with Mother Theresa's statement in 1988: 'Why should we care about the Earth when our duty is to the poor and sick among us? God will take care of the Earth.'[6]

Not everyone agrees with me, of course. 'Anna, come *on*', a former colleague implored the other day. 'Now isn't the time for your animal-rights bullshit.' But I think now will do just fine. And in fact, it seems like the people who disregard animal rights aren't just wrong: they are on the wrong side of history. In his book *Crossroads: The End of Wild Capitalism and the Future of Humanity*, emeritus Professor of Chinese Development Peter Nolan reminds us that, 'James Lovelock regards the Earth as a self-regulating system made up of an interconnected totality of organisms'.[7] Indeed, Lovelock's argument is that the Earth could, potentially, be quite unique in this respect: the miracle of life, again. Lovelock writes in *The Revenge of Gaia*,

> With breathtaking insolence, humans have taken the stores of carbon that Gaia buried to keep oxygen at its proper level and burnt them. In so doing they have usurped Gaia's authority and thwarted her obligation to keep the planet fit for life; they thought only of their comfort and convenience.[8]

Or perhaps, like now, they never thought at all. About the limitations of human understanding; about how our obsession with the future tips us towards a belief that we can control death; about the appalling comparison between the truckloads of animals being herded down ramps at the slaughterhouse and the human extermination camps of the Second World War. Of course, nobody likes this comparison. Human life, we feel, is too precious to trivialise by placing ourselves among the beasts. Once, on a walk, our dog swallowed a stone from the river bed. 'Daddy, daddy, will she die?', the children wanted to know. 'Oh, certainly', my husband replied. 'One day.' That we don't – in fact, *can't* – talk about grandma in the same way, is significant. A veil of obscurity and unease is drawn over the mortal reality of human existence: life is precious, death is tragic. In stark contrast to Daoism, our Western philosophy is to stand up and fight reality, no matter what. This stuff shapes our self-perception as *sapiens* (especially rich-nation ones) and frames our response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

I'm going to say a little more about genocide here, because it's important. The conversation around animal testing in relation to vaccine development is conspicuous by its almost total absence at a time when, more than ever, we are saturated with vaccine information and debate. It is a strange kind of numbness. We humans are, as evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond points out, a third species of chimpanzee and, as such, closely related to both common chimps and bonobos. In fact, most of us rather *like* apes, and children are born with a natural fondness for animals; hence why Disney and Pixar so routinely produce films in which animals adopt human roles. And yet, our capacity to personify other animals (a particularly dotty aunt of mine used to invite her cat to come and sit on 'mummy's lap') and dehumanise others (in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler reduced the 'Jewish question' to an agricultural matter of separating grain from 'chaff'; America, too, in support of the Zionist territorial claim in Palestine, said something similar of the Arab people for whom it was once home) is entirely dependent on context. For example, the 12th-century Mongol leader Temujin (better known as Genghis Khan, or 'supreme ruler') ordered the killing of an estimated 40 million people during his reign, reducing the entire world population of the time by around 11 per cent and, some scientists argue, temporarily slowing global warming in the same way that the high urban death toll and subsequent reforestation following the Black Death might also have caused a drop in global temperatures. 'So, he was an *eco-friendly* mass murderer', public historian Greg Jenner recently joked on his podcast *You're Dead to Me*;[9] a throwaway comment about past atrocities which made me laugh out loud, although, just a week earlier, I had struggled to raise a smile when Brit Award host Jack Whitehall hinted that the live audience might wind up the next day on a Covid infection graph.

The moving present, as Dawkins suggests, blinds us by our own subjectivity; simultaneously softening us to what matters – the here and now – and hardening us to everything else. It is with this kind of detachment that empires are built. Whoever said that 'species-ism is next to racism' was right; discrimination is a state of mind. All great empires were built upon the bloodshed of slavery: British, American, Roman and Egyptian, to name but a few. We might equally say that the imperial rule of humans as a species is maintained by the exploitation of a vast and largely invisible slave population: animals. When journalists casually report new dietary guidance for cattle which aims to reduce CO_2 emissions, the upbeat tone of the article reflects an optimism that this step could contribute to a better future for humankind, not for the cows themselves, who are born to die. 'Out of sight, out of mind' is truly a motto that most of us live by, myself included.

When, according to Tacitus, the Celtic princess Boudicca was stripped naked and whipped for her resistance to Rome, I doubt the average Roman citizen living in the heart of the empire – nearly 1,000 miles from the south coast of England – was even aware of this event until it entered the dusty detachment of the history chronicles. Celts, moreover, were viewed as sub-human, in the same way that serfdom was perceived as a natural order in imperial Russia, and in the same way that the majority of human beings tucking into a juicy steak – juicy, because the creature has been raised in a crate; it's never used its legs – will shrug and say, 'But we're carnivores', before taking another bite.

Believe it or not, wading into the vaccine debate isn't really my thing. After more than a decade working, one way or another, in the world of education, the latter is more where my engagement lies. (See interview in this issue – ed.) Still, it irks me to see the tiresome repetition of headlines which seem to, perhaps deliberately, dumb down the conversation around the topic of vaccination. Dawkins again, in *The God Delusion*, makes the point that tolerance breeds extremism. That's partly what motivated me to sit down and write this essay. Sometimes, it really *is* necessary to brave the prevailing wind, to stand up and say, 'Your worldview doesn't represent mine, and here's why'.

It's curious, too, how things are interconnected. I say, for example, that I've worked in education for nearly 15 years, and yet you'll notice at the end of this essay that I use the term

'homeschooling' to describe the way my children learn. This is, admittedly, an imperfect term: nothing like school takes place in our house. And yet, I experience such deep discomfort with the ideological echoes surrounding the word 'education', that I can't bring myself to use it in connection with my own family. *Education* is a term that resonates with contradictions; at once indicating the presence of an invisible hierarchy (what politicians call 'better education') and alluding to the siren call of social harmony, whilst at the same time smacking distastefully of brainwashing and absolutism. When I hear the word 'education', I think of Orwell's *1984* ('Newspeak', 'thoughtcrime', et cetera), of Chinese 're-education' of Xinjiang native people (Uighurs/Uyghurs), and of our own public health policy which prioritises 'education of minority groups' to improve uptake of the Covid vaccine. It's uncomfortable.

Christopher Caldwell, in his book *The Age of Entitlement*, examines the zealous totalitarianism with which political correctness was enforced within educational institutions in the early 1990s. 'They reminded the Berkeley philosopher John Searle', Caldwell writes, '…of Nazis'.[10] Searle himself made this observation in the *New York Review of Books*: 'The objective of converting the curriculum into an instrument of social transformation… is the very opposite of higher education. It is characteristic of the major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – leftist and rightist.'[11] When it comes down to it, many of us need – absolutely require – the badge of 'doing the right thing', and education is a way of streamlining this process for us by removing the 'wrong' options. And yet, much evil is done in the name of education and the 'greater good'.

Nearly a decade ago, after a particularly nasty assembly in which some kid was made to stand in front of the school and be publicly condemned by the headmaster, I remember a colleague leaning forward and whispering in my ear: 'That guy's on something, don't you think? Total fucking Nazi. And not your blind-eyed bureaucrat…. He's the one that would have shut the door to the gas chamber.' I flinched at this comment, only to realise – years later – that the quivering moral superiority which I unleashed on my colleague that day came from fear, not wisdom. As Dr Yuval Noah Harari states in the opening page of his book *Sapiens*: 'I encourage all of us, whatever our beliefs, to question the basic narratives of our world, to connect past developments with present concerns, and not to be afraid of controversial issues.'[12]

This approach is anathema to the narrow, nationalist indoctrination to which school systems gravitate. Our own public education system explicitly bans the teaching of so-called extremist ideologies; a list which includes anti-capitalism – thus, presumably, erasing the possibility of meaningful consideration of movements like Greenpeace, Hamas and most BLM groups. We teach children that vaccination is the correct approach to 'protect each other', not that humankind has grotesquely exceeded its growth limits and self-preservation in its current form has a very limited shelf-life. To raise children without diversity of thought isn't a religion; it's a cult. Not an echo chamber, but a bubble of truth. It is, ultimately, *anti-thought*; something which the education system (or, we might even say, education itself) is explicitly designed to achieve. As Syme tells Winston Smith in *1984*: 'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.'[13]

Things are interconnected. Education and freedom; growth and oppression; science and religion. This last duality is interesting, in that science and religion began their coexistence in an uneasy state of conflict, before shifting towards a time – *our* time – when science both merges with *and replaces* traditional religious belief. Nolan again, makes an important observation here, that:

> Among the hypothesis…[as to why levels of religious belief broadly decline in line with countries' levels of economic development] is the advance of the European welfare state in recent decades, which has helped to reduce people's feelings of vulnerability and isolation.[14]

This argument could also help to explain why Christian belief in America and Islamic belief among wealthier Muslim nations so strongly buck this trend: where access to a decent national health service is poor, it would seem there is a greater need for spirituality. In this way, science and mortality can be seen as closely entwined, with the increased application of science to the problem of existential uncertainty (in most wealthy nations) provoking a transfer of the primaeval 'fear of god' (i.e. fear of death) from religious consolation to a scientific solution. Indeed, the trajectory of modern medical science draws a number of parallels with the trajectory of major monotheistic religions throughout history: the way conflict led to conversion, the *authoritarian tendencies* of modern science,[15] and the knitting together of what the Islamic scholar Sayyid Qutb called 'a community of belief'.[16]

We can see echoes of these themes in our response to Covid-19, most notably in the way that the vaccination programme demands *absolute faith*, and also in the way that take-up of the vaccine is explicitly linked to community participation (the message is, 'You don't *belong* if you don't *believe*'). And it's very effective. The unvaccinated come to occupy the status of heretics, experiencing exile from their communities and even their own families, as well as the anxious wrath of the general public. It feels increasingly unsafe to identify as unvaccinated, in the same way that no candidate for the American presidency would dare pronounce themselves an atheist. At a garden party last month, I found myself locating another person who shared my views on vaccination, only by observing some minor details: a silence where there should have been the murmur of accord, the crossing and uncrossing of legs, a tight smile that said everything and gave nothing. I messaged her afterwards and found that I was right.

If we had been early Christians hiding in the Catacombs beneath the city of Rome, we would have drawn a fish symbol in the dirt. Perhaps, then, there is something quasi-religious in all forms of credence. Salvation through Christ, the healing power of homeopathy, the future of electric cars; we must all believe in something. And yet, when belief systems become too powerful, there is a real danger. Science today, like religion yesterday, provides personal comfort and shelters us from the fear of our own mortality; but science also, like religion before it, is a political tool, leveraging cooperation and stamping hard on dissent. The crazy thing is that science, like religion, is also a moving target. Answer this year's exam paper with next year's knowledge and you'll get a zero, just as generations of Spanish people living through centuries of Muslim and Christian crusades had to keep switching their allegiance to different gods and religions, if they wanted to live. There is certainly a powerful incentive to join this epic game of Blind Man's Buff, despite the obviousness that replacing one monopolistic belief system with another gets us precisely nowhere. I am all for tolerance, all for healthy debate and discussion, but when one way of thinking gets so big that it can no longer be questioned, then it should be kicked in the teeth.

We've been re-watching the Netflix series *Stranger Things*[17] this summer, which has our daughter asking questions. Last night, I saw her creep to the corner of the kitchen and quietly ask, 'Alexa, are you bugging our house?', upon which the device smoothly replied: 'Insects are real.' She's right, of course, to be curious. And she is right to pull a face at the answer she got, because it evades the question. And yet, the loathsome practice of surveillance capitalism,[18] along with Big Pharma and other self-feeding capitalist business models, are both contributors to, as well as *products of*, a global economic system that consistently lies to us, and to itself, about how it operates. Economists hail the free market as an extension of Social Darwinism, making the erroneous assumption that Darwinism is always progressive and, as such, selling it to us – and to low-income nations – as the One Solution.

Sure, this concept dangerously misrepresents Darwinism, but more than that, it demonstrates a fundamental dishonesty about the level of organic freedom that the system can tolerate. Government bailouts and nationalisation of collapsing banks during the global financial

crash of 2008, for example, undermined the natural evolution of the free market, in the same way that coercive mass health programmes erode the path of nature itself, with consequences for the future of our species – and for all life on this planet – that we simply can't fathom. Darwinism, we all know, isn't something to be *done*, at all; it just unfolds. It must be let go of, like a blind horse on the loose; not wrestled with, spurred on again, then checked with an anxious tug of the reins.

As a result of the handling of the financial crisis of 2008 (in particular, the domino effect by which wealthy nations 'circled the wagons', as Nolan puts it, by nationalising their banks), a global economic system perceived as knitting the world together through trade became, overnight, an instrument of nationalist division, with long-term consequences for global stability that are still only beginning to play out. Ask yourself, what world might we be living in if, as should have happened, global capitalism had fully and devastatingly imploded? Would the Apocalypse have been let loose on the world? – or, as with all evolutionary processes, would something new have been borne out of it? And what is the impact now, in our daily lives, of the strategic nationalisation of the banking system; a move which stemmed the immediate economic haemorrhage by cementing national self-interest, along with a new level of state involvement with – and *interest in* – constant stimulation of the economy?

My mum always told me: 'You made your bed and now you have to lie in it.' This doesn't appear to be the case if you're a hedge-fund investor. And yet, cushioning the real-world impact of capitalist practices surely blunts the evolutionary principles that most economic theory is built on; just as Western children, with their cushioned floors and 'baby-proof' nurseries, learn to walk, climb and jump more slowly and with less skill than hunter gatherer children playing by the camp fire, who go on to handle machetes with confidence while our kids are still struggling with shoe-laces. Just as there was a philosophical backlash in response to the emergence of the post-war 'nanny state', so many school critics argue that the innate desire to learn is smothered by the artificial regulation of institutionalised learning. (See Anna's interview, this issue – ed.)

I imagine your average anti-vaxxer might have something similar to say about health. There is, of course, a certain art to managing the immensely scaled-up societies in which we all live; an architecture is required to pull it all together. And recently, when a friend of mine became quite unwell with Covid, the NHS did a fantastic job. Sometimes, though, we get lost in the architecture and blinded by short-term goals. You can't, after all, just halt a force set in motion: an obvious point when faced with a tidal wave, but less obvious when faced with the ideological construct of money, or the invisible spread of a virus. Here, we lose our nerve and our instinct fails. We forget about *wu-wei* and the wisdom of backing that bolting horse; of letting it go because, if you check it, you'll both hit the deck.

I did wonder, as I was editing this article, whether I could iron out the confusion and make it more – I don't know – digestible. *Don't overlap ideas*, I scribbled in the margin of the page. *Stick with lab rats*. And perhaps that's good advice. Science reporter Dave Robson notes in *The Intelligence Trap* that our perception of the 'truthiness' of a statement is based on two key factors: repetition and simplicity.[19] Hence the impact of public-health messages over the past year, such as 'Hands, Face, Space' and 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'. We hear it over and over, we remember it, we internalise it, and – ultimately – we accept it.

Politicians are experts at crafting 'truthiness', although clearly truthiness and truth are not always the same thing. In fact, things that are actually true are frequently subtle and complex, requiring layered thinking and a reflective, open mind. Journalists like the term 'exponential growth', for example, and this was thrown around a lot at the start of the pandemic. Few people got out a calculator and figured that, based on exponential growth, by Day 5 of the pandemic, 16 people should be infected, but within two months, that number should stand at

18, 446, 744, 073, 709, 551, 615 (i.e. more than 2 billion *times* the current population of the Earth). This doesn't feel truthy, though. In fact – rather wonderfully – the *truth* in this case is, literally, unimaginable. Indeed, as I write this, the global figure for Covid fatalities stands at 4.36 million, which does seem an impressive number until you convert it to a percentage of the world population (4.36 million/7.67 billion x 100 = 0.06 per cent). Or compare it to the fact that, as Lovelock writes, 'almost a third of us will die of cancer anyway, mainly because we breathe air laden with that all pervasive carcinogen, oxygen'.[20] This doesn't *feel* real and we don't like it. We *do* like simplicity, though, and particularly things that are tangible; things we can hold, buy, swallow, or inject. That's why multivitamins are doing so well. It also explains our passion for shiny new electric cars; we enjoy the zero-emissions label and conveniently ignore the fact that over 60 per cent of electricity worldwide is produced by burning fossil fuels.

Ivan Illich was spot on when, in his book *Medical Nemesis*, he wrote that humanity largely subscribes to 'the belief that progress consists in buying one's way out of everything, including reality itself'.[21] You know, some of my closest friends believe ardently in the value of both homeopathy *and* vaccination; rather strange bedfellows. I could say, for example, that the dilution of homeopathic medicine is such that, according to the NHS, 'it's unlikely there's a single molecule of the original substance remaining'.[22] Or I could point out that the eradication of smallpox was overwhelmingly due to improved sanitation, not vaccination.[23] But when it comes down to it, the facts of the argument don't really matter. People believe what they want to believe and, increasingly, as the swell of online noise threatens to engulf us, we become wary of information itself: we gravitate, that is, more than ever towards simplicity. Someone recently sent me an interesting article on the false assumptions of medical science, and although I don't usually engage with this stuff, I read it through and found it to be quite illuminating. I shared it by email with a few people. 'It's very *long*, isn't it?', came one reply, while another admitted, 'I skimmed it, but honestly, there were so many statistics that I couldn't take it in'. In other words, it doesn't feel 'truthy'; nothing with any real detail does. And this is, quite plausibly, part of a much bigger, deliberate strategy.

Sapiens, as a species, are easily spooked and have a powerful herd instinct. For a very long time, this instinct kept us safe. If a crowd of people run past you, screaming in terror, and disappear round the bend, you can stand your ground and assess the facts, certainly, but you might be dead by the time you make up your mind. Better, then, to run. In this way, our biological programming reflects an effective 'groupthink' adaptation for survival on the African savanna, or the teeming jungles of India, not the myopic territory of navigating political propaganda and the real intentions of the major industries (electronics, banking, property, healthcare, energy, defence) that govern our *experience* of the world. This evolutionary mismatch also makes us vulnerable. In his book *The Age of Empathy*, Frans de Waal is clear on this. He writes:

> We are group animals to a terrifying degree. Since political leaders are masters at crowd psychology, history is replete with people following them en masse into insane adventures. All that a leader has to do is create an outside threat, whip up fear, and voila. The human herd instinct takes over.[24]

It could even be said that we are drawn, incurably, to disaster; that, deep down, we rather *enjoy* the catastrophising of events. Mark Twain in *Following the Equator*, for example, noted that 'the secret source of humour itself is not joy, but sorrow';[25] and in more recent times, Laura Dodsworth in her book *A State of Fear* (reviewed in this issue – ed.) makes the point that human beings in many ways relish the thrill of fear such that, for many, the experience of the pandemic has satisfied a deep existential need to face crisis which hasn't been met in generations, perhaps even, for Western Europeans (not so much if you live in Lebanon, Ukraine, Nicaragua, Myanmar, or in fact most of the rest of the world), since the Second World War.[26] Indeed, over the past 18 months Coronavirus has almost entirely hijacked the main agenda – climate change – within the rich nations, just as

real engagement with the climate crisis back at the 2017 G20 Summit in Hamburg was swamped by the London Bridge attack. It is easy to get excited about the remote possibility of dying at the hands of a terrorist, or a virus; much harder to imagine London under water.

Within this climate – where the populations are actively seeking sensationalism and journalists are rewarded for creating content that gets the most clicks – there is a merging of interests: reassurance, rationalisation and depolarisation don't sell and so, gradually, our expectation of what the news *is* slides into a new realm. The news, of course, has never held an unbiased mirror to reality; however, with the tidal rise of social media and its algorithmic newsfeed, there has been a distinct shift in the direction of news as a source of popular entertainment. And the pandemic has pushed the dial further, driving the ambitions of 'clickbait' content firmly into the mainstream. Dodsworth again devotes six pages of her book *A State of Fear* to listing some of the provocative headlines that the pandemic has served us, including 'Iran's coronavirus mass graves so big they can be seen from SPACE as 429 die from disease' (*The Sun*, 13 March 2020)[27] and 'UK working mothers are "sacrificial lambs" in coronavirus childcare crisis' (the *Guardian*, 24 July 2020).[28] The fact that you can also see your own back garden from space (Google Earth) and that humans coped okay for 200,000 years without preschool childcare (the nursery-school movement was a 19th-century response to the economic demands of the Industrial Revolution) is beside the point: we all lapped up and internalised these stories.

More importantly, though, the news became confusing, and perhaps intentionally so. It's hard to deny that the splurge of conflicting reports, incomprehensible graphs, and zig-zagging policy over the past 18 months has triggered a natural self-preservation response which, in most people, tends either towards apathy (the feeling of being 'done' with this) or paralysis (a sense of being 'frozen' and unable to move). In other words, variants of fight or flight. But the art of obfuscation is far from an accidental by-product of pandemic hysteria. Both Shoshana Zuboff in her analysis of the techniques of surveillance capitalism and Mark Snyder in his examination of Russian propaganda[29] explain how obfuscation erases opposition by rendering the message incomprehensible. In short, we have nothing to fight against, and are left shadow-boxing in a corner, alone.

Many couples observe a strict parity of opinion and taste, but this has never been the case with us. Our home has always resonated with (mostly!) amicable cognitive dissonance, drawn from different nations, cultures, languages, ages, and radically different experiences of the pathway from childhood to adulthood. My dad is 83 and my husband has asthma: they have both taken the vaccine and we don't argue about it. What we fear, above all, is absolutism: the idea that something cannot be questioned, or even openly discussed. Despite the certainty with which an article like this must be written, I am the first to doubt myself, question my convictions, laugh at my own stubbornness, or – more often – retreat into tongue-tied silence. It troubles me that, for the majority of people supporting the pro-vaxx argument, this shadow of doubt is not permitted. Just a cursory glance at human history should surely make all of us seriously question our own standpoint; the precipice of the present moment upon which we proclaim, for now, our thoughts and beliefs.

It seems crazy that modern nations which have, in very recent history, waged hugely destructive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq based on false pretexts (America), divided and exploited the people of the former Ottoman Empire in ways that have created dangerous geopolitical tension (Britain and France), and practised chemical castration of homosexuals and Jews during the Second World War (Germany) should be dictating to us – the common people – what our moral compass is, or should be. Whatever our position on the vaccination for Covid-19, let it come from our own careful reflection, not from the rhetoric shoved down our throats every time a politician takes the podium or a government-sponsored advertisement hijacks the radio. I'm no conspiracy theorist, but we are fools if we ignore the fact that history has revealed almost any imaginable – and unimaginable – thing to be

possible; we just think (or hope) that it won't happen to *us*.

The relatively recent dominance of Western power in the world, too, causes us to forget our own place, and over-emphasise the innate 'righteousness' of our approach as 'democratic' nations. We forget that for thousands of years, while China and the Muslim world were making rapid cultural and scientific progress, the European peninsula remained a savage, backward and constantly warring region of the world. Many nations, most obviously Russia, still perceive us this way, despite our own jostling self-importance. We forget – or perhaps, more accurately, *we don't know* – the long story of history; how civilisations rise and fall, how the British conquest of Sudan at the end of the 19th century represented only the geography of power *at that time* because, 2,000 years before, present-day Sudan lay at the heart of the rich civilisation of ancient Nubia whilst Britain was still a primitive culture emerging from the late Neolithic Age. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the continuance of barbaric and dishonest geopolitical practices, whilst reliant on a number of asymmetries, are founded primarily on the presumption – and maintenance – of public ignorance. Only ignorance could breed such wilful collusion with a system that is designed by, and benefits, less than 1 per cent of the global population.

Contrary to the idea that we live in an 'information economy', *lack of knowledge* is, in fact, baked into the way our society works and holds together: through **strategic ignorance** (the obfuscation of truth and accessibility of misinformation relating to security, health, money, and so on), the growth of **circumstantial ignorance** (longer working hours, training demands, and the suck of social media mean few people have the time to read beyond the headlines), and the effect of **designed ignorance** (schools teach a limited, nationalist curriculum with the purpose of imprinting the ideological/political construct of national identity and culture on to the raw material of human life). A bigger game is at stake than anything we are fed through the media, but we don't see it – and we don't *want* to see it, either.

A wonderful book I read last year called *The Ends of the World* commented that human beings represent the only ecological force in the history of our planet to be conscious of itself in a way that glacial melting, say, or even the expansion of the universe, cannot be.[30] But then I look in the mirror and I honestly wonder, *are we*? Or are we, in fact – like gravity, or like a virus – just a blind force of nature, groping forward in the dark?

James Lovelock, whose name I mentioned at the beginning, once rocked a space conference by rejecting the proposed method for detecting life on Mars. The scientists turned on him. 'How would *you* do it, then?', they wanted to know. 'Well', Lovelock replied, 'I suppose I'd look for an entropy reduction.'[31] The definition of entropy, as Lovelock himself notes, 'is physically precise but conceptually obscure'.[32] It might best be understood as the amount of disorder, or chaos, measurable in the free energy of a material. Thus, in keeping with the laws of thermodynamics, where there is a *reduction* in entropy, it is not because energy has been lost, but rather that it has been re-purposed and redirected, from randomness to order, just as Apollo charmed the elements of the universe from chaos to harmony with his lyre. On Earth, this entropic reduction reveals itself as a cycling, or vorticity, of energy – water, carbon, life cycles, temperature; and this, Lovelock explains, is Gaia: 'a departure from the expectations of steady state inorganic chemistry… [to reveal] an astonishing and unexpected degree of contrivance'.[33]

Today, despite the scientists' scepticism at that meeting, Lovelock's Gaia Theory remains the basis for the detection of life on other planets. Lao Tzu must have been right, then: 'If the majority doesn't laugh at you, beware that you must be saying something wrong. When the majority thinks you are a fool, only then is there some possibility of you being a wise man.' And look, I've managed to get to the end of this essay without clarifying whether or not I accept the basic principles of vaccination; a bridge which, for me, doesn't need to be crossed because it's beside the point. Indeed, there are too many obvious questions and counter-arguments to

begin meaningfully addressing them. No doubt there is also a degree of hypocrisy and human error in my thinking; I don't deny that. But right now, in this moment and on this particular topic, I know where I stand, and – as long as I can – I will reject the straight-jacketed humanism that we are currently being wrestled into by non-thinking 'liberals'. The term 'social duty' has become heated, weaponised; are there, after all, no *other* duties? The fact, for example, that crops cannot be grown on the scale we do without intensive irrigation should be a sign that the organic cycling of water cannot sustain populations at our level, but we ignore it. The burning of fossil fuels disrupts the carbon cycle, but we are indeed 'locked in'.[34] The financial crashes – not just that of 2008 – which Western 'casino capitalism' has incurred should have given rise to a different system, but we refuse. And, despite the devastation wrought by the vast exceeding of our species' growth limit, when a natural force – a virus, say – comes along to restore some balance, the green gloves come off and we fight it tooth and claw.

There, I said it in the end: *it's okay for people to die of natural causes*. Like Gilgamesh, we all fear death, which is why it's hard to face this reality, and why I hesitated before writing that line. And like Utnapishtim, we all hope that our small lives will in some way be favoured by the gods. Yet, we know that when other animal populations face an external threat, they respond by adapting their behaviour, shifting their fundamental interaction with the environment; they don't 'get jabbed' and bounce back to business-as-usual. They don't (they *can't*) bypass nature. And maybe that's why they've made it so far, indeed so much further than us: they *listen*.

The Coronavirus is a sign – a symptom of a sickening planet – that we don't want to see, and the vaccine reflects a human-centric, non-adaptive response. We could listen to the message: slow down, live more locally, travel less, de-urbanise, eat real food, raise our own children, buy only what we need. But the fact is, we don't want to do that, and we aren't smart enough to see the real disaster looming straight ahead. Recycling, tree planting, sustainable energy… – these are gestures only; fragile attempts to maintain control of a vast, crumbling system and part of our broader refusal to give back to Gaia.

Perhaps, after all, I *am* a Covidiot. And perhaps a few guinea pigs hardly matter. But I know, if nothing else, that you cannot 'fight' a virus. As the French Chemist Antione Lavoisier said: 'Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed.' And so, I will not take the Covid-19 vaccine unless I am legally made to. I will, as Daoism states, do nothing. I will observe the entropic reduction and trust the organic cycling of energy. I will ride that horse 'til it drops.

August 2021

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