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#13 to #18

The Other that Does Not Exist and Its Scientific Committees

By *Éric Laurent* (France)

The epidemic and its committees

What is very striking in this global epidemic is that all governments, dictatorships, democracies whether illiberal or not, populisms of all kinds and all forms are led to take drastic measures to manage the population. How to justify them? Pure autocrats, those actually so or who merely dream they are, rely only on themselves. Bolsonaro gives his arms of honor and Putin declares that Russia is under control. For the others, the use of scientific committees advising the government has become a necessity in an uncertain environment.



If we take the English and French cases, it is clear that the same remedy displayed gives rise to very different measures taken. One point should be emphasized at the outset: despite the apparent massive differences in the measures taken, they are based on the same studies. It is all the easier to note that, as Darwin dictates, the English epidemiologists have a prestige and an authority recognized worldwide. A long chain of transmission has enabled English evolutionary biologists to contribute mainly to the "new synthesis" combining Mendelian genetics and Darwinian natural selection in a mathematical modeling of population genetics. From Ronald Aylmer on.

Fisher to Richard Dawkins and John Maynard Smith, Oxford and Cambridge have produced an impeccable line of evolutionary biologists and epidemiologists. We will come back to the potential strangeness of the opinions supported by these scientists, because biologist is a risky profession. It predisposes one to make generalizations about biological types [*sur l'espèce*] that may occasionally seem strange, if not dangerous.

This time it's not from Oxbridge that the voice of authority comes, but from Imperial College London. On March 16, Neil Ferguson's team provided record reports and modeling of possible scenarios in record time for both the British and French governments. This report was taken up by the committee of ten French experts as an example, both because it came from a prestigious source and because it dared to present risky perspectives.

Herd immunity and Ferguson's accordion

The team at Imperial college put the real of the epidemic into numbers on the basis of two options and five possible actions to slow the virus. "These two options are qualified as 'mitigation' and 'suppression' (containment), playing on five types of action: isolation of confirmed cases at home; quarantining their families; social distancing of people over 70; distancing widened to the whole population; the closure of schools and universities."^[i]

The first option, mitigation, does not aim to halt the virus, but wants to control it by taking actions according to the five possible actions, as a minimum, in order to obtain immunity for the population as quickly as possible, leading to a decline in the number of cases when the group collective protection is reached – or "herd immunity" as they say in English. The concept is brutal in its original language: herd as in a herd of animals. This is why translations generally euphemize the concept. Talking about group immunity or collective immunity is more human.

"The second option, containment, aims to get a given individual to spread the virus to less than one person, leading to the end of the epidemic. This authoritarian strategy applied by China presupposes more radical measures going as far as confining the entire population. But after five months of such a regime, the epidemic could flare up again when the measures are stopped." Whatever solution is chosen, what remains to be achieved is, whether we like it or not, herd immunity to a virus about which there is much to learn.

For the team at Imperial College, whether a lot of people are allowed to be infected or a lot of people are contained is not a question of absolute principle, but a pragmatic question. The fundamental basis for the calculation has to be the resource of intensive care beds available to each health care system. The concept 'bed' implies both the object and the personnel required to operate it. And it takes a lot of people.

This is why, in a first instance, on the 15th of March, standing alongside Boris Johnson and his counterpart, the chief medical officer, the British government's chief scientific advisor, Patrick Vallance stated quite clearly: "*It's not possible to stop everyone getting it and it's also not desirable, because we need to have some immunity to protect ourselves in the future.*"^[ii]

The application of the concept of herd immunity – which comes from the theory of vaccines – to a situation where none exists has shocked people. P. Vallance is the former head of research and development for GlaxoSmithKline. His adherence to the logic of the market is acquired. And such a declaration, bordering on laissez-faire, has certainly been inspired by Brexit advisor Dominic Cummings.^[iii] The authorities therefore let the Bath Half Marathon run, because according to their reasoning, they are young and fit people, if they become infected, they will increase general immunity and there will be few serious cases among them.

But very quickly, the figures became unavoidable. For immunity, 60% of the population would have to be infected, or 40 million people in Britain. As 5% of cases are currently considered to be serious, this would mean 2 million serious cases, probably distributed over a fairly short time frame, which has to be compared with a similar number of intensive care beds as in France: that is, depending on availability, between 5,000 and 7,000 beds.

The editor of the world's most prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, tweeted, "The UK government – Matt Hancock and Boris Johnson – claim they are following the science. But that is not true. The evidence is clear. We need urgent implementation of social distancing and closure policies. The government is playing roulette with the public. This is a major error."^[iv] Boris Johnson's neo-Churchillian calls to prepare the population to lose loved ones have of course not reassured anyone.

In a more reasonable and less neoliberal way, Ferguson's team have indicated a path, which is however staggering in the constraints that would need to be imposed and in the reinvention of all our ways of going

about our daily business that it entails. The only reasonable way would be to alternate periods of complete confinement with periods of stress relief in a way that would be correlated with the number of intensive care beds occupied in hospitals. When full containment has freed enough beds, the constraints would be loosened so that another part of the population becomes infected, until sufficient group immunity is reached. In Ferguson's models, maximum constraints would be required between one-third and one-half of the time, for 18 months, until a vaccine can be developed and distributed on a mass scale. "These alarming conclusions echo the work of the Inserm-Sorbonne University Epix-Lab laboratory led by Vittoria Colizza (Inserm, Sorbonne-University), showing the effectiveness and limitations of school closures and the development of telework."^[v] It will take a long time. Nobody fundamentally says otherwise. We will be living the accordion of the constraints [in stops-and-starts], until the vaccine arrives.

Numbers and the impossible to bear

In the first session of Jacques-Alain Miller's course entitled "The Other Who Doesn't Exist and Its Ethics Committees" – a course in which I participated – he was led to articulate a certain impasse in the discourse of science, since it is no longer able to appease the anxieties of the subject of contemporary civilization, immersed as he is in the feeling that everything is semblance. This subject is confronted with the Other "in its ruination."^[vi] In our civilization, we know "explicitly, implicitly, while misrecognising it, unconsciously, but [we know] that the Other is only a semblant."^[vii] The term semblant is here taken in its broadest sense. It includes arithmetic calculation [*le calcul*].

We live in the *empire of semblants*.^[viii] With this word, Lacan gave new life to the title of Roland Barthes' essay, *Empire of Signs*. It was an opportunity to underline how close, for him, Japan seemed to be to Europe, thoroughly imbued with the civilization of science "the only communication that occurred there for me [...] is also the only kind that over there as elsewhere can be communication, in not being dialogue: namely, scientific discourse."^[ix] The empire of semblants is not just one of the names of Japan, it is also one of the names of our civilization that is revealed.

It is from the inexistence of the Other that would guarantee the real of science that another real arises for the subject who lives in language – that of anxiety, hope, love, hate, madness and feeble-mindedness [*débilité mentale*]. All these affects and passions will be lying in wait for us as we confront the virus; they accompany the scientific "proofs" like their shadow. As J.-A. Miller pointed out very well: "The inexistence of the Other is not antinomic to the real, on the contrary, it is correlative to it. [...] It is [...] the real proper to the unconscious, at least the one to which, according to Lacan's expression, the unconscious testifies, [...] the real as it manifests itself in the clinic as the impossible to bear."

The impossible to bear is also present in these unavoidable choices that the ethical committees are trying to overcome, for there have already been and there will be major ethical problems to confront, whether at the level of medicine, as such, or on a personal level. As an expert simply puts it, on a medical level: "The difference today is that we will give up resuscitating people who, in current practice, could have benefited from treatment and survived. The lack of available resources determines the choices, not the medical criteria usually applicable."^[x]

On a personal level, the way everyone is able to interpret the appallingly restrictive instructions they are given introduces a critical variable into any overall calculation. The impact of the measures taken in European democracies may be sufficient, "but it very much depends on the way people behave and how they apply these instructions [...]"

In a state that is not totalitarian, it is a question of personal ethics. This can undermine the model one way or another."^[xi] No doubt it is because of these ethical uncertainties - which will come to the fore in a second phase – that European governments have found it necessary to turn to scientific committees.

Our future of numerical constraints

Confinement has given rise to original demonstrations of solidarity and ways of doing things that emphasize a regained sense of belonging to a community – one that is not simply that of a biological herd, but invents ways of being part of a collective society, like the Italians who sing in chorus from their balconies or applaud their national health staff. In Spain, the ironic twist of the authorization passes that allow one to walk one's dog also testifies to the search for the right way to live, together, the unbearable constraints that fall from above.

But these constraints, which are certainly based on science, do nothing to alleviate the anxiety that each person feels about what awaits us. And we must prepare ourselves to be able to discuss, together, the merits of the intrusive mechanisms that will be put in place to keep us in check until the development of a vaccine, which is the only tenable outcome.

In Denmark, on the 12th of March, lawmakers passed an emergency law that allows authorities to use coercion to examine, treat or isolate an infected person. The most powerful and, at the same time, most subtle form of constraint will be the use of individual tracking apps to regulate the constraints in their severity and in their application. As early as the 17th of March, drawing on examples from Israeli and Singapore, the editor of the MIT Technology Review predicted our new digital future: “Ultimately, however, I predict that we’ll restore the ability to socialize safely by developing more sophisticated ways to identify who is a disease risk and who isn’t, and discriminating—legally—against those who are. We can see harbingers of this in the measures some countries are taking today. Israel is going to use the cell-phone location data with which its intelligence services track terrorists to trace people who’ve been in touch with known carriers of the virus. Singapore does exhaustive contact tracing and publishes detailed data on each known case, all but identifying people by name.”[\[xii\]](#)

While doing everything we can to help hospitals and health personnel to meet the public health imperatives that are overwhelming them, we must also, one by one, help to elucidate how the practices of collective constraints to which we consent must be developed in such a way as to ensure they are livable. Not only *top-down*, but also *bottom-up*, by showing the right ways to respond to it. This implies transparency in the health data and the policies that are being developed, beyond the tremendous effort of clarity of the Ferguson report.

Translated by Philip Dravers

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[i] Morin H., Benkimoun P. & Hecketsweiler C., « Covid-19 : les scénarios décisifs de modélisateurs britanniques » / « Coronavirus : des modélisations montrent que l’endiguement du virus prendra plusieurs mois », *Le Monde*, 17 March 2020, [available here](#).

[ii] Ducourtreux C., « L’immunité collective » : stratégie risquée du Royaume-Uni pour lutter contre le coronavirus », *Le Monde*, 15 March 2020, [available here](#).

[iii] Cf. “No 10 denies claim Dominic Cummings argued to ‘let old people die’”, *The Guardian*, [available here](#). [Reference added to the original [TN].

[iv] Horton R., quoted by *ibid.*, [available here](#).

[v] Morin H., Benkimoun P. & Hecketsweiler C., « Coronavirus : des modélisations montrent que l’endiguement du virus prendra plusieurs mois », *op. cit.* & « Expected Impact of School Closure and Telework to Mitigate COVID-19 Epidemic in France », [available here](#).

[vi] Miller J.-A., « L’orientation lacanienne. L’Autre qui n’existe pas et ses comités d’éthique » (1996-1997), lesson of 20 November 1996, unpublished.

[vii] *Ibid.*

[viii] Lacan, J. “Lituraterre”, trans. A.R. Price, *Hurly-Burly* 9 (2013), p. 38.

[ix] *Ibid.*

[x] Hirsch E. (professeur d’éthique médicale à l’université Paris-Saclay), « Covid-19 : des choix éthiques redoutables attendent les équipes médicales », on an opinion page on the website of Figaro, 17 March 2020, [available here](#).

[xi] Cauchemez S. (epidemiologist at the Institut Pasteur and modeller for the AP-HP), quoted by Hecketsweiler C. & Pietralunga C., « Virus : les simulations alarmantes pour la France », *Le Monde*, 17 March 2020, [available here](#).

[xii] Lichfield G., “We’re not going back to normal”, *MIT Technology Review*, 17 March 2020, [available here](#).

Well! Well! And Now?

By *Françoise Stark-Mornington* (France)

When the real arises in our life, it comes without warning, as unknown, it constitutes an event we cannot describe. We are speechless. Following in the footsteps of Freud and Lacan, we can talk about trauma as the unexpected encounter with the unspeakable real.

Tyché

Lacan borrows the term *tyché* from Aristotle.[1] Confronted by *tyché*, the subject finds himself helpless and terrified. Freud distinguishes fear from the dimension of surprise, from the anxiety that signals the imminence of danger. The brutality of trauma breaks the continuity of psychic life by preventing the event from being connected to the signifying chain, leaving it meaningless, incapable, unlike other life events, of being integrated into the subject's history. Lacan forged a neologism to designate this sudden break: "*le traumatisme*."[2] This unassimilable event returns the subject to the fundamental distress of the defenseless fragile little child when he finds himself far from the Other protector. It reveals an unfathomable abyss.



A Signifier Alone

As such, the S_1 COVID-19 at the origin of this accidental emergence, appeared by chance under a new face. This signifier without connection to an S_2 and unable to kickstart a new signifying chain is isolated. It is an enigma. Indeed, language is above all the index of an unrepresentable. There is no pre-established knowledge concerning existential questions. The human subject comes up against the lack which cannot say everything about death and sex. This is why the subject has no choice but to forge his own fantasy solution from his early experiences and from the signifiers that have been transmitted to him. The discourse of science puts itself to work searching for a truth to cover the lack exposed by the emergence of the real.

A Singular Invention

It is through the operation of symbolic castration, the sole operator of lack, that the subject can forge with a signifying imaginary construction. Making a compass so that he can orient himself in the face of the enigma of life. What is traumatic is the hole in knowledge, this gap where the unconscious comes to lodge. The sanitary lockdown recommended all around the world, a time of suspense in the life of the city, obliges us to revisit the automaton as repetition and invites everyone to invent, to create anew. In this time of "social distancing," like the S_1 of the discourse of the master, the discourse of the analyst is thereby modified in his very practice.

The function of *tyché*, as such, constitutes the reality of a breaking experience. A tipping point between the old and the new, it introduces a conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. This is where the unassimilable can be buffered by subjective homeostasis, as in dream activity, for example.

[1] Lacan J., (1964) Seminar Book XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller, transl. A. Sheridan, Penguin, London, 1979, see Chapter 5: "Tyché and Automaton".

[2] Lacan J., (1973-1974), Seminar XXI *Les non-dupes errent*, lesson of 19 February 1974, unpublished. [A condensation of "hole" [*trou*] and "trauma"]

Image © "Surfaces et détails", courtesy Michèle Simeoni, Paris 2020

Pandemic: The Endless Trench

By *Gustavo Stiglitz* (Argentina)

I am writing about the pandemic. Everything we do lately is about the pandemic, in the sense of being caught up in it, being immersed in it. We enclose ourselves in it, we are frightened by it, we get angry about it, we think, we talk, we write about it; we work on it and also don't have work on account of it; we love and are separated by it.

There is the real of death, but there is also toilet paper as a sign of a real in the symbolic. How can I think - I am not saying understand - this phenomenon, which Borderías has already questioned? The scarce and therefore precious toilet paper is not that of the blank page awaiting the stroke. It appears as the place to deposit the object of waste, into which the pandemic throws us.



Behind the drive to hoard there is the fall of a veil, a tear through which we appear reduced to mosquitoes transmitting the disease, or to becoming its potential waste products. The thought of feces without a place to deposit them is a way of imaging the real, which we find unbearable enough to go out to ransack the supermarket shelves.

Fear. I am watching a movie a day about pandemics, which itself is only possible thanks to the pandemic. Yesterday I saw the Spanish *La trinchera infinita* [The Endless Trench], by Garaño, Arregui and Goenaga, about a man who spends thirty years locked between a real evil and a social construction. And when he finally finds the way out, it turns out that self-confinement is the most difficult thing to overcome.

“It’s not so bad in here”, says the protagonist, in his basement of two-by-one meters. But how to manage out there with the light, the sun, the noise, the others! Only the bond of love gives him the opportunity to find a way out, and the man in the bunker does not let the opportunity escape.

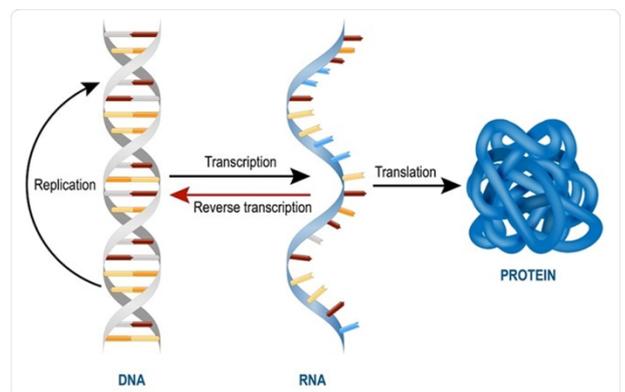
Let us hope that this contingent pandemic does not become a necessary and endless trench in the face of the encounters with the real. A trench can be an aid to sleep. Let it not become that. Let us be careful but let us also stay alert.

A Viridical [sic] Relation to the Real

By *Janet Haney* (UK)

A “veridical relation to the real” is how Lacan put it upon returning to France after his five-week visit to England in 1945 [1]. I have often tried to imagine what it might have been like to finally be free and to travel from France to England after having been held fast by the grip of the Nazis throughout the Second World War.

A “veridical relation to the real.” It is a beautiful phrase – unusual, and strangely flattering. It is good to look back



beyond the date of my birth to a time when the English could be recognized as having a veridical relation to the real, no? But what is it, actually.

This powerful phrase might open a way to understand the policy of “herd immunity” that was announced last week by the British Prime Minister. Is this a *viridical* [sic] relation to the real, to think of the British people as a herd? Or is this, rather, an example of the “fairground mentality” or “phantasmagorias of our grandeur” [2] that the current UK leader is prone to. It’s time for an interpretation.

Did this leader mean to ask his people to face the real, take their chances, embrace the invader in single combat? Are we supposed to offer it a place in our lungs and airways, struggle with it in our singular way and become data for future research, rearranged letters in a new DNA sequence? My own tendency has been to want to get to know this virus more intimately, but first of all with words.

Taking a deep breath, and with properly soaped hands on a freshly cleaned keyboard, this is the way I propose to begin to respond to that particular command. I eschew the queue for loo roll and focus my attention on the invader. Entrenched with my dictionaries. Summoning up skills honed while translating, proofreading, replicating (publishing), practising, and even from the period preceding my encounter with psychoanalysis as a sociologist of science.

First approach: with respect. The name: Corona Virus. A crown. A royal thing. Each one less than 1000th of the diameter of a single hair on your head [3] – but it never goes out without its hat on. The protuberances that inspired the name “crown” (apparently due to the way it appeared via early technology used by scientists who first met it in the 1960s) are made of protein, and have the property of sticking to stuff, preferably the stuff of a human air tract and lung. These protein prongs are one of three elements that comprise this self-assembled entity we now call “the enemy”, and with which we are said to be “at war” [4].

This week I heard an analysand say that the virus has no voice, a scientist told me that it is not alive and therefore it cannot be killed. Another added that it cannot be killed, but it can be disassembled. Soap [5], he said, does this disassembling by attacking the lipid element that gives the virus its shape. Inside this round crown there exists a single strip of RNA (ribonucleic acid) that seeks out its mate in the double helix we call our DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) [3]. It folds itself inside one strip and sets about replicating itself, drawing resources from its host and laying waste to what once thrived alive. It destroys the environment it depends on before moving on to the next. The environment – our body – tries to fight back.

Wait a minute – that sounds uncannily familiar. There is an overlapping element between the concerns of global warming and this pandemic [6].

On the other side of this twisted strip I begin to intuit ... that this works the other way around.

Is this one-all-alone RNA, covered in fat, wearing a crown, already a response to a double helix, covered in fat, wearing a crown, and invading the other’s environment? This virus has achieved what Greta Thunberg asks for. An interruption in the economic programme, a grounding of flights. A time to rethink the relationships we have not only to each other but also to what might be called the world.

On the other side of this virus there appears to be something linking it to the letters of our own DNA. Lacan taught me that on the other side of the enemy we find the friend [7]. A closer look at the writing around this seems necessary now. But not without remembering the position from which it is written and the address at which it aims. Transcription, reverse transcription, replication, proofreading, translation ... plus something not quite known but which has to be assumed (the subject) and something rather mysterious, slightly beyond the horizon, maybe more to do with poetry (the Other). I think I found something like this in a video poem on FaceBook that was circulating earlier this morning [8]: “A letter from the virus: Listen”.

[1] Jacques Lacan, “British Psychiatry and the War”, transl. Philip Dravers and Véronique Voruz, *Psychoanalytical Notebooks*, No. 33, 2019.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

- [3] Paul Beckwith and Stuart Scott in conversation on YouTube, *UPFSI Channel*, published 15 March 2020.
- [4] “Anatomy of a killer: Understanding SARS-CoV-2 and the drugs that might lessen its power: Modest improvements in treatment could make a big difference” Economist Briefing, *Economist Magazine*, 12 March 2020.
- [5] Pall Thordarson, “The Science of Soap – here’s how it kills the coronavirus”, *The Guardian*, Thursday 12 March 2020.
- [6] John Vidal, “‘Tip of the Iceberg’: Is Our Destruction of Nature Responsible for Covid-19?”, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 18 March 2020. John Vidal is the author of *McLibel: Burger Culture on Trial*, The New Press, 1997.
- [7] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book I, Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, transl. John Forrester, Norton, London/New York, 1975.
- [8] Kristin Flyntz, Darinka Montico, David Fesliyan, published by *Films for Action* (watched 21 March 2020), <https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/a-letter-from-the-virus-listen/#.XnW-eLcAd0Q.email>

The Law of Nature and the Real Without Law

By *Miquel Bassols* (Spain)

The real without law seems unthinkable. It is a limit idea that in the first instance means that the real is without natural law. - Jacques-Alain Miller

Everything that you take from nature, she later reclaims from you with interest. - Isidore of Muncia (11th century AD)

Strangely familiar images reach us from Italy, both unforeseen and revealing, after several days of confinement of the population during the coronavirus epidemic. In Cagliari, dolphins come into the harbour to the edge of the docks. In Venice, the canals are no longer the usual tourist dung heap, the water is clear to the bottom, making way for swans, fish and various birds. Nature thus reasserts its law when the speaking being has to retreat - a little, only a little - before the epidemic of its own forms of enjoyment that we call civilization. Nature is epidemic by nature, if I am allowed this pleonasm, either with swans in Venice or with global viruses traversing countries and borders. The human being is epidemic because he speaks and is inhabited by that enjoying substance that we call the signifier.^[1] We know that we will see images like those of Cagliari and Venice in other places and times. In each instance, the law of nature and the real of jouissance seem to be the obverse and the converse of the same traumatic event for the subject of our time. But we should distinguish them.

Perhaps today as never before Humanity – with the capital - can and should recognize itself as a single subject in the face of the irruption of the real, as that collective that Jacques Lacan defined so enigmatically as “the subject of the individual ”^[2]. A subject faced with a challenge that precisely can only be overcome collectively, with a calculus of action that is necessarily collective. We are currently undergoing – day by day - the most brutal effects of an event that is and will continue to be a paradigm of the real in the 21st century. But which real is at stake? This is undoubtedly a good time to read or to reread Jacques-Alain Miller’s intervention in preparation for the Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis of 2014, dedicated precisely to “A real for the 21st century”^[3]. We find there several gems to gather and to elaborate during these days.



Nature is no longer the real

This deadly little machine named SARS-CoV2, which is transmitted and multiplies from one body to another, generating the symptoms of COVID-19, is a virus. Most biologists tell us that a virus is not a living being —

unlike a bacterium — but that it needs a cell, a living being, to replicate itself. For this reason, other biologists say that it is a being that is neither alive nor dead, like a sort of Monsieur Valdemar. It all depends on where we situate the frontier of “the real of life”^[4], which not at all straightforward. What we do know for sure is that it is a virus that is transmitted and replicates according to very precise laws. In the case of COVID-19 it is a law that we are deciphering little by little, far too slowly. There is, therefore, a real of time at stake that is decisive for its treatment. The real of the speaking being, we often repeat following Lacan's late teaching, is a real without law. But the SARS-CoV2 virus follows an implacable law, it follows the law of nature that you have to know how to decipher in order to confront it. The problem is that we do not yet know enough about its law and above all we do not yet know how to deactivate its mode of contagion to create efficient antivirals and a vaccine. It needs the luck of Alan Turing, who deciphered the code of the infernal machine called "Enigma" used by the Third Reich for the transmission of secret messages during the Second World War. Turing's success is estimated to have shortened the end of the war by two to four years and saved thousands of lives. With regard to the coronavirus, we are not yet advanced enough in the race to obtain properly tested antivirals and vaccines.

In the case of SARS-CoV2 we thus are not faced with the real without law but rather faced with a phenomenon of nature that follows its laws, the laws that science since Galileo deciphers according to his maxim that "nature is written in the language of mathematics". It is true that in Antiquity nature and the real were in contiguity, they overlapped in some way, they were made of the same stuff. But one of the effects of modern science has been precisely to separate nature from the real.

As Jacques-Alain Miller pointed out: “Previously the real was called nature. Nature was the name of the real when there was no disorder in the real. When nature was the name of the real you could say, as Lacan did, that the real always returns to the same place. Only in this epoch, in which the real disguised itself as nature, the real appeared as the most evident, the most elevated, manifestation of the very concept of order... You could say that in this epoch the real as nature had the function of the Other of the Other, that is, it was the very guarantee of the symbolic order.”^[5]

There are different ways of giving oneself today to this impossible function of Other of the Other to guarantee a meaning when the real erupts in a traumatic way: scientism is one, religion is another. The behavioral psychologist, for his part, advises us: “Don't say chaos! Don't panic! Don't think about it!” But this is the same as telling us not to think of a white elephant, which is the best way to keep thinking and worrying about a white elephant without actually deciphering its linguistic being as a white elephant.

The real has no meaning

Another gem: “Not having meaning is a criterion of the real, in as much as it is when one has arrived at the outside meaning that one can think that one has emerged from the fictions produced by a *wanting to say*. “The real is destitute of meaning” is equivalent to *the real does not respond to any wanting to say*. Meaning escapes. One gives meaning, there is a donation of meaning by way of the fantasmatic lucubration.”^[6]

Unlike the real, the COVID-19 illness is today a huge bubble of meaning, of religious meaning, like any meaning, and always on the verge of bursting. "Coronavirus" is the master of the meaning of our times, it is the master signifier par excellence, to such an extent that even the Church has given orders to empty the basins of holy water under its mandate. And with good reason, of course. That is where, in effect, all the fantasies flourish, individual and collective, making it into a demonic force, the quintessential malign god who wants the extinction of Humanity, delivering punishment to a civilization of excessive enjoyment. Giving a bit of meaning relieves us for a while, but the return effect is usually much worse still than the initial lack of meaning. Meaning, always religious, is viral, as opposed to the real that has nothing viral about it, but rather does not cease not to be written, without any meaning.

The experience of the real

Faced with disordered nature, faced with the real that no longer returns to the same place, the subject is anguished. Scientism promises to overcome anguish with knowledge, a knowledge that would be inscribed in the real at the outset. In vain. Religion promises to overcome it with meaning. Also in vain.

What real is then at stake for psychoanalysis? That of always? No, the real is no longer what it was, this is one of the things we learned at our 2014 Congress of the WAP. It concerns the real of the 21st century, a real separated from nature, the residue of a nature that was ordered by a law, divine or not, scientific or not, but which is already a nature that is irretrievably lost. And that this is indeed a real without law, without a law that can predict, at least, its eruption. It is here that the experience of these days can give us an unprecedented testimony, on a planetary level, of an experience of the real in the collective as subject of the individual in different registers of the real:

- Of the real of time. It is an imperceptible time, not symbolizable, not chronologically representable, but that marks the time of the illness generated by the coronavirus. It is one of the features that makes it more difficult to treat: that it can be spread silently, in the absence of any observable medical symptoms. That is indeed the real in its most Lacanian sense, a real that necessarily introduces a logical time in the subject of the collective: something that does not cease not to be written... until it is written. The problem is no longer whether one day you might catch it - we know that it will reach at least 70% of the population - but rather when it will be, and when it will stop not giving symptomatic signs in the body.

- Of the real of space in the experience of confinement. Metric space, now necessarily restricted, gives way these days to another space closer to non-metric space. It is incredible the things that can be done in a square meter that is also a cubic meter.

- The real of collective time to mitigate the effects of the inevitable spread of the virus. In fact, the collective panic is not generated today by the coronavirus itself but by the inevitable overwhelming of the health system that introduces the need for a logical time: "Don't all get sick at once, please." This is also the real of time, traumatic for each one.

- Of the real of having a body, always a little in the hypochondriac mode.

- And, above all, the real of the solitude of the speaking being, whether or not you are in company.

The experience of the real in which we find ourselves is therefore not so much the experience of the illness itself but rather the experience of this subjective time that is also a collective time, strangely familiar, that occurs without being able to represent itself, without being able to name itself, without being able to count. This is this real that psychoanalysis is interested in and deals with. The symptom dimension of this experience occurs without necessarily being inhabited by the coronavirus itself, only by the discourse that tries to give meaning to its eruption into reality as effect of the pure law of nature.

The law of nature can be predictable - this is the task of science. The real without law is not predictable - this is the task of psychoanalysis. Faced with this difference, it will be good to resort today to the maxim of the Stoics to make a collective experience of the real in the least traumatic way possible: serenity in the face of the predictable, courage in the face of the unforeseeable, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Translated Betina Ganim & Roger Litten

[1] Lacan, J, *The Seminar, Book XX, Encore*, Norton, 1998, p. 24: "I will say that the signifier is situated at the level of enjoying substance."

[2] Lacan, J., "The collective is nothing but the subject of the individual".

[3] Miller, J.-A., "Presentation of the theme of the IXth Congress of the WAP", available online at:

http://www.congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/Presentation-du-theme_Jacques-Alain-Miller.html Also published as "A Real for the 21st Century", in *Scilicet, A Real for the 21st Century*, AMP/NLS, 2014.

[4] Mais où est donc Zadig?

[5] Miller, J.-A., “Presentation of the theme of the IXth Congress of the WAP”, available online at: http://www.congresamp2014.com/en/template.php?file=Textos/Presentation-du-theme_Jacques-Alain-Miller.html Also published as “A Real for the 21st Century”, in *Scilicet, A Real for the 21st Century*, AMP/NLS, 2014, p. 27.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Image @ The Alan Turing statue, created in slate by Stephen Kettle in 2007 located at Bletchley Park in England

Life Over Death

By Thomas Svolos (USA)

In one of his last essays, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud offered a kind of metapsychological model of what we Lacanians call the drive (poorly translated in English as instinct). He advanced a hypothesis of a struggle between *Eros*, which propelled the human being to life, and *Thanatos*, which pushed the human being to death and destruction. This dyad, this tension, was deployed by Freud to read various psychological and social phenomena.



In a way, we find this dyad reworked in Jacques-Alain Miller’s lectures delivered years ago in Brazil, just published in French as *L’Os d’une Cure*. One of the points I recall from this text is Miller’s description of the end points of psychoanalysis, and, in particular, the importance in Lacan’s early work of the “assumption of death” in the psychoanalytic experience. The analysand, the patient, in psychoanalysis, must come to terms with his or her own mortality, a form of limitation. Later in Lacan’s work, Miller emphasizes the “assumption of sexuality” as key to the psychoanalytic treatment. Each analysand must come to terms with how he or she will live life as a sexed being. It is notable that in both of these moments, these “assumptions,” the issue at play is an unknown: there is no knowledge of death as an experience (witness all the fascination people have for the so-called “near death” experiences) and sexuality itself also has an ineffable or lawless quality to it, what Freud called an inherent “polymorphous perversity,” in spite of all our socially constructed conventions about it.

We see this tension, the dyad of death and life, at play in subjective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, the issue of death is at the forefront of many people’s minds now. Clearly, this infectious agent is an agent of death and has killed large number of people and will kill yet more before this is over. And, the brave physicians, nurses and other health care professionals confront this on a daily basis in hospitals and clinics, even more so given resource limitations in personal protective equipment and ventilators, that not only will force them to put their lives on the line, but also potentially put them in situations where they will have to make life or death choices regarding access to care. And, indeed, all people and all social institutions will make decisions about how to respond to this threat of death—choices about how to assume (or not assume) responsibility to address this agent of death: choices about following or ignoring public health recommendations and so forth. In our practice and in conversations with friends and colleagues, these are issues that people are talking about and dealing with.

But, in addition to the struggle with death, as psychoanalysts, we also readily observe subjective struggle with *Eros*, with not just sexuality proper, but more broadly about how to choose to live: to go on living on a day to day basis, with all the impact of this pandemic on daily life, impact that ranges from minor inconveniences to the implementation of “shelter in place” orders in whole states and countries. People struggle enormously with issues about how to connect with family and friends and neighbors and co-workers. The shattering of

our fictions or our fantasies of how we live in the world we live in and the disruption to rituals and patterns of how we experience life on a day to day basis has destabilized relationships and many people's ability to enjoy life. These are the concerns that I hear about equally strongly, at least in my tiny corner of the world and in what I read in newspapers. The losses, not only of death, but of life, are real, and here I am referring to the disruption of our daily life such as work routines, socializing, restaurant and café life, cultural activities, school, and our rituals of celebration and mourning, such as graduations and funerals. But, what we are losing is not life itself, is not the drive proper, we might say, but the fantasies that provide us access to it, the semblants that we use to structure our day to day experience so that we might find enjoyment in it. That is key to remember, for the life drive is still present. We find it in unexpected places. The citizens of urban centers like Milan stand on their balconies, and whole neighborhoods sing songs. Citizens of Barcelona bring their musical instruments out on the balcony and provide an impromptu concert for neighbors, to great applause. Scientific colleagues missing out on important social discussion at cancelled scientific meetings all sit in their respective offices, in front of their computers, with a drink in their hands and hold virtual happy hours to chat and gossip with one another. Educational programs jump into high gear to find ways to teach students at home, using online technologies to keep the academic mission alive in difficult times. Churches provide religious ceremonies on the internet. The stories and examples one hears about or reads on the internet give testimony to the strength of *Eros* to bring people together, to keep life alive even in the face of death.

This crisis and the responses we hear about in our practice and in society also highlights the critical value of the final work of Lacan. The stable Symbolic Order that defined much of the early Lacan (and his reading of Freud as well) is gone, or, rather, is unveiled as a semblant, and one that is on shaky grounds at moments like this. But, as we read in the final Lacan, those semblants (psychic reality, the Oedipus complex and so forth) are just one way to take hold of the Real and hold the subject together, merely common "knotting strategies," as it were, as they were taken up by lots of people and institutionally supported. In this moment of crisis, we find the value of other, novel, knotting solutions, other *sinthomes*, in the very creativity that people talk about in sessions and in society. Jacques-Alain Miller, in *Six Paradigms of Jouissance*, emphasized the special role for creativity and pragmatics in the final Lacan—I can think of no better example of this than what we find now in subjective, and social, responses to this pandemic.

Yes, this pandemic is terrible, and we must assume the responsibility individually and socially to confront the death and destruction that it brings. And we, as psychoanalysts, can help people struggling with that. But, as psychoanalysts, we always are focused on what is not working in our analysands' lives. My sense is that in addition to death, it is *Eros* or life itself that is at stake, and helping people know how to assume the responsibility of how to live is another no less important and urgent challenge we face today. The old ways may no longer work, but we find people creating new ones every day.
