



The least excusable responses to the COVID-19 crisis look as if they were built on either 'the power of positive thinking' (a concept developed by Norman Vincent Peale, apparently a mentor to Trump) or 'marionetting minds is more important than saying what I think is the case' (the WHO's justification for delaying the use of the term 'pandemic' via previously unannounced rejection of their published vocabulary-severity scale).

In the WHO's case, the harm of 'defeatism' anticipated to follow from a magic utterance ('pandemic') was taken to outweigh the good of aggressive testing and tracing. This was a poor prediction, as it happens: overall the worldwide response to COVID-19 has erred on the side of laxity through ostrich-mindedness or ignorant dismissal, not despair through defeatism. The reasoning employed illustrates, for me, the danger of radically consequentialist reasoning for anyone in a leadership role, in proportion to the scale of the leader's responsibility. That is, while it is relatively easy for a human leader to outsmart small problems (enemies human and otherwise), it is quite impossible to outsmart problems on the scale of global health. As problems become too big to outsmart, honesty becomes more effective: you can fight the most evil form best only by outputting the maximum of form you can muster. Information-hiding is effective in a game of near-peers; it is useless in a joust against the (both colossal and clever) dragon. Leaders bulwark against things far too vast to handle (else they would be simple craftsmen). If 'pandemic' was ever a concept whereby you grasped reality well, then as a leader — precisely in proportionality to the situation's seriousness — you would do best to transmit your best conception to others, not try to predict and control their thoughts.

In Trump's case, both the disease and the country's lack of preparedness seem to have been rejected as spectrous fear-generators — apparently the greatest evil —

rather than noted and addressed as real risks. Trump considered the threat small (in contradiction to virologists' and epidemiologists' warnings since very early January), local (confined to China), and within human control (conflation of blame and harm in attributing the virus to China). These are perhaps common (maybe useful) working assumption of classical liberal thought, and no doubt easy errors for a humanist to fall into (albeit sometimes, perhaps fairly, critiqued as a special Greek neurosis). But while narcissistic human fantasies ('the thoroughly human-dominated cosmos') generated by philosophers make downstream scholarship merely boring, the same fantasies hypostasized by leaders kill. The human that always calls himself 'tremendous' has abandoned the complementary participle tremens; but a disease thrice the contagiousness and many times the lethality of influenza is tremendum, if anything is. For Trump, as for any Peale-ist, fear, or tevs 'negativity', is only ever enervating. And so Trump is positive to a bloody fault: he cites the lowest numbers he can find, worships the first molecule that a respected researcher called a cure, rages against trivial personal critique, proposes free associations as therapy. For Trump, as for any liberal corrupted by a flattering mirror, the puppeteers of human activity — of capital — the suits — are the puppeteers of the universe: and so thought and time and energy are wasted parading executive soteriology.

The mind-bullying of Trump's usual personal carriage images the parochial responses of both the WHO and the Trump administration — both in ways baked in to their supporting cultures, I think — to the COVID-19 crisis. Where once a mildly violent manipulation of another human social receptor — I mean Trump's famously ridiculous "CEO" handshake — served perhaps slightly (if always embarrassingly) to jockey the leader above small-fry competitors, the same gesture during COVID19 task force briefings serves both to illustrate the impotence of human leadership unleveraged by science and the self-destructiveness of a leader's regime-maintaining ambitions. Useless handshakes and head-patting mind-games positively and negatively magnified a physically real, not-a-game, no-debt-curable-backstop crisis. Neither belongs anywhere: but most of all not in a crisis, in proportion to the crisis' severity and scale.

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