

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/on-covidiocy/>

Emma Jones

On “Covidiocy”

The following is from Urban Dictionary, accessed May 6, 2020:

Covidiot: Related to [the Covid-19 pandemic](#);

A person who acts like an irresponsible idiot during the Covid-19 pandemic, ignoring common sense, [decency](#), science, and professional advice leading to the further spread of the virus and needless deaths of thousands.

1. Did you see that [covidiot](#) that licked the toilet seat as a coronavirus challenge?
2. The covidiot was arrested for purposely coughing on produce in the store and is now being charged as a terrorist
3. Donald J. Trump said coronavirus ‘will go away by April’ now thousands are dead, what a massive covidiot
4. If you were afraid to drink Corona [beer during](#) the Covid-19 pandemic you might be a covidiot
5. Donald Trump said “people are dying who have never died before” from the coronavirus, making him undeniably a covidiot
6. [Rand Paul](#) / Donald J. Trump – One is a covidiot, the other such a covidiot the pandemic may be renamed after him entirely

What could it possibly mean to philosophize about the COVID-19 pandemic? To be a lover, or perhaps a pursuer, of wisdom in relation to it? Would “wisdom” here equate to science; is the discourse of a pandemic best left to that arena, or is a deeper exploration possible, desirable? Put another way: Is the COVID-19 philosopher the opposite of the “covidiot” or are we one and the same?

How can we *think* about the pandemic, which seems to close down thinking? Pandemic: something that affects all people both as individuals and as a group, *pan-demos*. Perhaps it presents an *aporia* that baffles *logos* understood as “reason” because, after all, it seems we only consistently know *how much we don’t know*. We are (if we allow it) in touch primarily with a perilous uncertainty.

Of course there are other kinds of *logos*: humor pieces and memes abound capitalizing on the contradictions in the “information” about the virus (and sometimes willfully oversimplifying them): e.g. it’s deadly/it’s not so deadly; you should wear a mask/you should not wear a mask; you should stay in/you should go to the grocery store; you should be productive; you should eschew productivity in favor of self-care, and so on.

Commentaries that seek to make any kind of “once and for all” sense of this dialectic feel entirely hubristic and run the risk of incurring, if not the wrath of Zeus, a raised eyebrow. It seems that almost anything that claims to truly “know” something here will all too easily veer into conspiracy territory: a kind of self-enclosed psychosis that aims to erase the negativity of uncertainty that propels the dialectic of the pandemic

(I mean here the pandemic as a psychic fact or existential situation rather than an epidemiological phenomenon).

So: is now a time for philosophers to speak or to be silent? Philosophy has always been far less elegant and far more challenging when it attempts to think *about* our human “situation,” to the use the term favored by existentialists. Giorgio Agamben draws ire for his expressed distaste for state-based efforts to control the virus; and not without reason: his thinking seems rooted in abstraction and suggests we must risk our physical life to preserve something more intangible, which comes off as precisely *out-of-touch* with the *situation* (Owen 2020; Agamben 2020).

Of course, we are all out-of-touch at present.

Are memes the real philosophers? “Alone Together” they proclaim. Perhaps most of us intellectuals are simply waiting at the ready to attach our particular “thing” to the virus: The environmental implications; the revolution to come at last; the crisis we had always anticipated. The time to consult the stars, to purchase new products, to enroll in new courses. An astrologer tells me “novel coronavirus pandemic” means “new coronation for all,” which, of course, it does. But, the real question, which meanings are the *right* ones, the ones to be attended to?

Is this a new coronation as the kings and queens of our idiocracies, or could it be something more?

A particularly prevalent piece of covidioy – at least here in the United States – is that most of us *cannot keep in mind* the reason for the restrictions that we have imposed and that, in some cases, local and state governments have imposed – stay-at-home orders, social distancing guidelines, masks. Over and over, there is an elision between the stated intention – the idea of “flattening the curve,” slowing the rate of infection, protecting the most vulnerable – and the sense that restrictions are really about personal protection and/or “fear.” In the U.S., it seems we have now moved into a phase where the image of the mask seems to crystallize this confusion and become a signifier loaded with political tensions, with the result that some stores require customers to wear masks while others have turned customers away precisely *for* wearing them (Noor 2020).

It seems we Americans struggle to hold in our minds a logic of collective care. If we are staying home, it must be because we are afraid of getting sick, or sick already. If public spaces are empty, it must be because there is an “apocalypse.” (Of course, perhaps there is: a lifting of the veil to perceive the truth of an emptiness in our public life that was always already there.) Despite our best efforts, we cannot hang on to the *sense* of a collective staying in to protect others. Instead, everyone believes they are staying in to protect themselves. Then, when we feel we have stayed in “enough” and are no longer “afraid,” we determine it is “safe to go out.”

The mask, which could be a symbol of the intersubjective realm of both danger and the potential for care, is seen by some as signifying thoughtless compliance or fear. Most tellingly, it is seen as an *individual* choice, as relating to an individual’s level of fear and/or risk – although the fact is, most cloth masks protect *only others* (and ourselves through others).

While there is much one could say about the cultural, economic, and political aspects of these phenomena, one thought is that perhaps the pandemic highlights the reality that we have the potential (and even the desire) to harm and kill one another (Mbembe & Bercito 2020) – the very potential that, as Freud explores, is in a psychic sense the origin of society and thus “humanity” – to return to Agamben’s theme of the human vs. animal distinction (Freud 1912-1913; Agamben 2004).

Could it be in blocking out our awareness of this potential for killing and being killed by others that the covidiot is born? The word “idiot” connotes “private” via its Greek root (?????; *idiotes*). Is it so uncomfortable or unbearable to consider the interdependence, the fragility, and the potential for harm that collective life and the realm of the between-us holds that we must retreat to this privacy, this idiocy?

Perhaps: to evoke the fragility of the between-us, the air, the space that is neither the one nor the other but in which both partake and which both sustains life and contains the promise of death, is also to evoke the uncomfortable, sadistic desire to harm. To evoke the fragility of the elderly is also to evoke the desire for the erasure of old age and death – and perhaps, above all, because it brings our finitude into sharp relief, to evoke *birth* as a figure of intolerable interdependence. Our inescapable existential condition is not only as a being-towards-death but also as a being born-from-another, as explored in a recent text by Luce Irigaray (2017). In being born-from-another we experience ourselves as intolerably helpless, as we do when subject to the “whims” of others who “choose” whether or not to wear the mask.

So, perhaps it is in fact to be *specifically human* to become aware of this intersubjective realm and potential for killing that is now marked by the presence or absence of the mask – and even the desire for it – and to decide to exert a choice over whether, and how, to use this power. Of course, we cannot *decide* without cutting, without killing (*-cid* and *-cide* from the Latin root to “cut” or “kill”).

In fact, we always pass death on to one another, it is our inheritance: whether in the broad sense of giving birth to a life that will become a death or in a specific sense of killing, through viral transmission, or through premeditated means.

Care as a function of collective life is perhaps making the distinctions between these categories; which requires recognizing, tolerating, their possibility.

Perhaps in covidioy the difficulty of keeping these elements in mind leads to blocking out huge swaths of our experience; and to the reduction, in public discourse, of our current situation to a choice between fear and bravery against the “enemy” virus: unwilling to recognize our own bodies as potential enemies, unwilling to be in touch with our own potential and desire for death as well as our dependence on others to protect us from it and from them.

In short, as Bob Dylan (1975) sang in “Idiot Wind”, lamenting the many failures of relationship: “We are idiots, babe. It’s a wonder we can even feed ourselves.”

Bibliography:

Agamben, G:

– (2020) “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Retrieved

from <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>

– (2004) *The Open: Man and Animal*, transl. by K. Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

Dylan, B. (1975) *Blood on the Tracks* (Columbia Records).

Covidiot (2020, April 5) Urban Dictionary. Retrieved May 6, 2020 from

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Covidiot>

Freud, S. (1912-1913) *Totem and Taboo*, SE, 13.

Mbembe, A. & Bercito, D. (2020) “‘The Pandemic Democratizes the Power to Kill’. An Interview,” transl. by Thomas Marchevsky, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Retrieved from <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/the-pandemic-democratizes-the-power-to-kill-an-interview/>

Noor, P. (2020, May 22) “No masks allowed: stores turn customers away in US culture war,” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/22/us-stores-against-face-masks>

Owen, J. (2020) “States of Emergency, Metaphors of Virus, and COVID-19,” *Verso Books Blog*. Retrieved from

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4636-states-of-emergency-metaphors-of-virus-and-covid-19>

Irigaray, L. (2017) *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Bio:

Emma R. Jones, PhD, is a practicing psychotherapist and writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. She studied philosophy and literature at the New School for Social Research before earning a Doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oregon – where her dissertation focused on intersections of the work of Irigaray, Lacan, and Heidegger – followed by a Masters in counseling psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies. She is the author of numerous book chapters and articles in journals such as *Epoch?* and *L’Esprit Créateur*. Most recently, she published “Politics of Relation, Politics of Love,” in *Towards a New Human Being* (2019), Eds. Luce Irigaray, Mahon O’Brien, and Christos Hadjioannou. (London: Palgrave Macmillan).