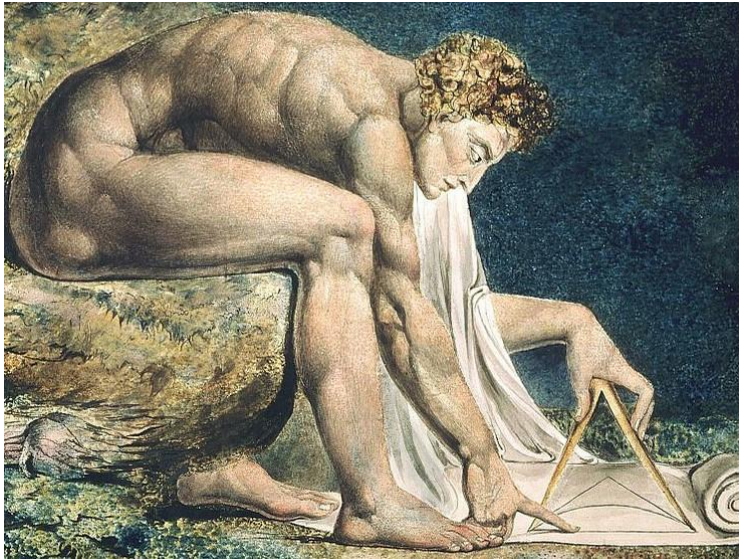




Epsilon Theory

A Truth That's Told With Bad Intent

May 13, 2020



*A truth that's told
with bad intent
Beats all the lies you
can invent.*

-- William Blake (1757 – 1827)

That's Isaac Newton in William Blake's painting, one of the major *villains* in Blake's philosophy. Why? Because Newton was a modeler, a proponent of Science with a capital S, the most repressive force in the modern age.

I think Blake was absolutely right.

Our narratives of COVID-19 are all lies.

They are lies of a particular sort, political narratives that have a nugget of truth within them, but are told with bad intent. They are told this way because it works. Because the nugget of truth hides a deeper, unpleasant truth. And a Big Lie.

Some are narratives of the political left. Some are narratives of the political right.

They are all narratives of betrayal, meaning that they seek to excuse or promote policies designed for institutional advantage rather than the common good.



Clockwise from Donald Trump, that's Fox's Sean Hannity, the CDC's Robert Redfield, Surgeon General Jerome Adams, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Harvard President Larry Bacow, the White House's Larry Kudlow, and Vox co-founder Ezra Klein. They all get their moment of shame in our magnum opus on the ubiquitous institutional betrayals here in the early days of the pandemic age – [First the People](#).

How do you recognize a political narrative of betrayal?

It's always based on a model.

A political narrative of betrayal is always a top-down application of social abstraction, where a behavioral model is treated as the thing unto itself, falsely elevated as the subject and object of policy, rather than relegated to the analytical toolbox where it belongs. A political narrative of betrayal will always use “model” as a noun rather than “model” as a verb. A political narrative of betrayal always **BEGINS** with a prescriptive model of mass behavior – a model that by the most amazing coincidence serves the institutional advantage of the narrative creator – and **ENDS** with a forced fit to the individual citizen.

All political narratives of betrayal start like this, with a disembodied, modeled abstraction like “the American way of life” or “the economy” or “the market” or “public health” or “national security”. An abstraction that is then defined for you in such a way as to logically require the willing abdication of your individual rights, first as an American and ultimately as a human being.

A political lie always starts by establishing a disembodied, modeled abstractions like “the economy”. From there, the political lie will then start talking about the “sacrifices” that we citizens need to make for these disembodied, modeled abstractions.

Nothing makes me angrier.



Nothing makes me angrier than a politician like Chris Christie, a man whose idea of personal sacrifice is a regular order of fries, shaking his finger at us and telling us how reopening the local Arby's is just like fighting Nazi Germany, how OUR deaths then and now are a "necessary sacrifice" in order to "stand up for the American way of life."

The American Way of Life™ does not exist. It's not a thing.

What exists is the way of life of Americans.

Start with the individual American. Start with their political rights. Start with the citizens themselves. *This is how a legitimate government acts in both words and deeds.*

The government's job – its ONE JOB – is to protect our individual rights in ways that we cannot do ourselves. That's not an easy job. At all. There are trade-offs and gray areas, and clear-eyed/full-hearted people can disagree on how to accomplish that job. But it is the job.

Its job is NOT to create "alternative" facts like modeled seasonal flu deaths or modeled herd immunity or modeled COVID-19 deaths in nudging service to institutional goals. Its job is NOT to champion the rights of the politically-connected few and ignore the rights of the politically-unconnected many. Its job is NOT to deny the rights of *any* citizen in service to a politically convenient abstraction like "the American way of life" or "the economy" or "public health".

When individual rights conflict in unavoidable ways or we are faced with an immediate and overwhelming threat to our *system* of individual rights, a legitimate government based on the consent of the governed may be forced to decide which citizens' rights must be temporarily suspended. *This is a legitimate government's last resort.*

Today it is our government's first resort.

Today it is the *first choice* of our political leaders – White House and statehouse, Democrat and Republican – to decide which rights to prioritize and which rights to deny in service to THEIR conception of what society should look like. All wrapped up in a nugget of truth told with bad intent.

This is how an illegitimate government acts.

Like this:

Model-driven Narrative #1

Whatabout the Flu?



Dr. Sanjay “minor compared to the flu” Gupta



Rush “it’s just the common cold, folks” Limbaugh

Political goal: COVID-19 threat minimization.

Truth nugget: the seasonal flu is a nasty (and mitigatable) disease.

Deep Truth nugget: we are shockingly blasé about all sorts of largely preventable deaths, and we warehouse our elderly parents in horrible places.

Big Lie: this isn’t a big deal.

Policy prescription: wash your hands!

Embedded model: laughably inaccurate models of seasonal flu deaths, designed to nudge popular adoption of annual vaccinations.

As the US death toll mounts, this narrative fades farther and farther into the background of our collective memory, but “Whatabout the Flu?” dominated the early weeks of American policy debates. And while it’s easy to find examples of this narrative from the political right, let’s not forget that CNN and Vox were beating this drum as hard as they could when Trump was shutting down some flights from China.

People don’t believe me when I tell them that we don’t actually count flu deaths, that the numbers thrown around by the Dr. Guptas and the Rush Limbaughs are taken from CDC models of pneumonia deaths. But it’s true. Basically we count pediatric flu deaths and hospitalized adult flu deaths, *multiply by six*, and intentionally generate an inflated flu death total. Why intentional? *Because you need to be nudged into taking your annual flu vaccine.*

If we compare, for instance, the number of people who died in the United States from COVID-19 in the second full week of April to the number of people who died from influenza during the worst week of the past seven flu seasons (as reported to the CDC), we find that the novel coronavirus killed between 9.5 and 44 times more people than seasonal flu. In other words, the coronavirus is not anything like the flu: It is much, much worse. – *Scientific American (April 28, 2020)*

On an apples-to-apples, counted deaths versus counted deaths basis, there is no comparison between COVID-19 and the flu. It's pure narrative. Pure hokum. All based on a laughably inaccurate model. All geared towards the political lie of COVID-19 minimization.

Model-driven Narrative #2

Herd Immunity!



Anders “the death toll surprised us” Tegnell of Sweden



Dan “more important things than living” Patrick of Texas

Political goal: preservation of economic status quo.

Truth nugget: massive unemployment is devastating.

Deep Truth nugget: massive unemployment is particularly devastating to incumbent politicians.

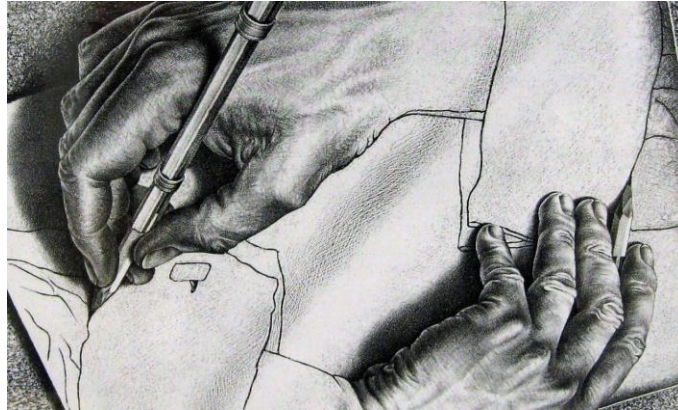
Big Lie: in the meantime, we can protect the olds and the sick.

Policy prescription: hey, you'll probably be fine! I mean ... probably.

Embedded model: laughably inaccurate models of COVID-19 infection spread and severity, designed to nudge fantasies of V-shaped recoveries in the stock market and commercial real estate prices.

Again, it's easy to find examples of this narrative from the political right, but let's not forget that the most prominent national example of "Herd Immunity!" policy is driven by the leftwing Social Democrats – Green Party coalition in Sweden. Again, the politicization of these narratives is not a left/right thing, it's a power thing.

It's a high-functioning sociopath thing.



What do I mean by sociopathy and division?

I mean the way our political and economic leaders beat the narrative drum about how this virus prefers to kill the old rather than the young, *as if that matters* for our policy choices, as if older Americans are lesser Americans, as if we should think of them differently – with less empathy – than Americans who are more like “us”.

I mean the way our political and economic leaders beat the narrative drum about how this virus prefers to kill those with “pre-existing conditions”, *as if that matters* for our policy choices, as if chronically ill Americans are lesser Americans, as if we should think of them differently – with less empathy – than Americans who are more like “us”.

I mean the way our political and economic leaders beat the narrative drum about how this virus hits certain “hotspot” regions, *as if that matters* for our policy choices, as if hotspot regions are lesser regions, as if we should think of Americans who live there differently – with less empathy – than Americans who are in “our” region.

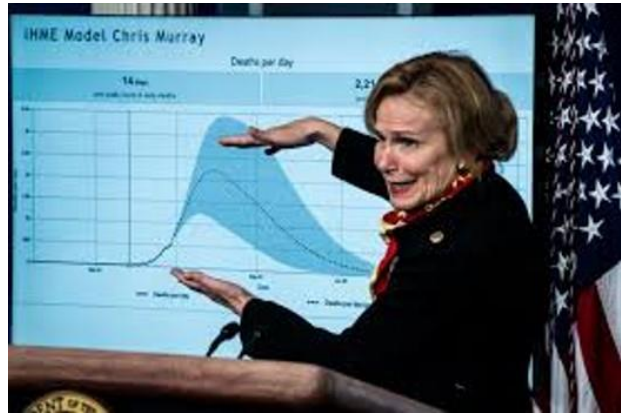
And once you stop thinking in terms of trade offs, once you stop thinking in terms of probabilities and projected mortality rates and cost/benefit analysis and this expected utility model versus that expected utility model ... once you start thinking in terms of empathy and Minimax Regret ... everything will change for you. – [Once In A Lifetime](#)

Model-driven Narrative #3

Flatten the Curve!



Gov. Andrew “we need 40,000 ventilators” Cuomo



Dr. Deborah “Trump is so attentive to the data” Birx

Political goal: COVID-19 threat maximization.

Truth nugget: lockdowns prevent a surge in cases which can overwhelm the healthcare system.

Deep Truth nugget: when we’ve got everyone freaked out about staying alive, there’s no end to the crazy authoritarian stuff we can get away with.

Big Lie: we can get R_0 down to zero.

Policy prescription: you’ll find these ankle monitors to be surprisingly light and comfortable to wear!

Embedded model: laughably inaccurate models of COVID-19 deaths, malleable enough to serve the political aspirations of both the White House and their opponents.

Of the three politicized narratives, “Flatten the Curve!” has morphed the most from its original form, as its early success in convincing even Donald Trump that lockdowns were necessary to prevent a healthcare system meltdown gave both its White House missionaries and its state house missionaries free rein to use this narrative to fill a wide range of policy vacuums.

The original goals of “Flatten the Curve!” – to prevent a surge in COVID-19 cases with the potential to overwhelm the healthcare system – were achieved. The flood in New York City crested ... and fell. Other cities that seemed as if they might follow in NYC’s footsteps ... did not. Mission accomplished! But in the grand tradition of other initially successful emergency government *interventions* (“Quantitative Easing!”, anyone?) “Flatten the Curve!” is well on its way to becoming a permanent government *program*.

Today, “Flatten the Curve!” has become the narrative rationale for a range of extraordinary executive actions – on both the left AND the right – that would make Lincoln blush. This is the narrative that will propel the Surveillance State into a permanent feature of American life. This is the narrative that will propel the final transformation of capital markets into a political utility. This is the narrative that will propel us into a war with China. If we let it.

If we let it.

Okay, Ben, how do we stop it? How do we turn this misbegotten process of political lying on its head? How do we reject top-down, model-derived policies and their narratives? How do we BEGIN with the biology of this virus and the rights of individual citizens and build a policy framework from THAT?

This virus is 2-6x more contagious/infectious than the seasonal flu (depending on environment), and 10-20x more deadly/debilitating (depending on whether or not your local healthcare system is overwhelmed). It hits men harder than women, and the old harder than the young. Those are the facts. They’ve been the facts since January when we first studied this virus. The facts have not changed.

Knowing these biological facts, what social policies would you design around THAT?

As a 56 year-old man in just ok physical condition, I figure I have a 1% chance of death or disability if I catch COVID-19 when my local healthcare system is in good shape, maybe 4% if my healthcare system is overwhelmed. Both of those odds are completely unacceptable. To me. Other 56 year-old citizens may feel differently. Other 25 year-old citizens may feel the same. Each of us has a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the legitimacy of our government is predicated on preserving those rights for each of us. Liberty and justice for ALL ... imagine that.

Knowing these foundational rights, what social policies would you design around THAT?

If you’ve read notes like [Inception](#) and [The Long Now: Make, Protect, Teach](#) and [Things Fall Apart: Politics](#), you know that I am a full-hearted believer in acting from the bottom-up, in bypassing and ignoring the high-functioning sociopaths who dominate our top-down hierarchies of markets and politics. I still believe that.

But it doesn’t work with COVID-19.

The core problem with any rights-based approach to public policy is dealing with questions of competing rights. Under what circumstances could your right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness come into conflict with my right to life? Under most circumstances, neither of us is forced to compromise our rights, because we have the choice to NOT interact with each other. If my laundromat requires you to wear a mask to enter, but you think wearing a mask is an affront to your liberty, then the solution is easy: go wash your clothes somewhere else. And vice versa if I think your restaurant does a poor job of enforcing social distancing and food safety: I’ll take my business elsewhere.

Let me put this a bit more bluntly. I think that COVID-19 deniers and truthers are idiots. I think that people who minimize or otherwise ignore the clear and present danger that the biology of this virus presents to themselves and their families are fools. And there's no perfect way to insulate their idiocy and foolishness from the rest of us. But if these idiots and fools want to take stupid risks alongside other idiots and fools, if their vision of liberty and the pursuit of happiness is to revel in some death cult, but in a way that largely allows us non-death cultists to opt out ... well, I believe it is wrong for a government to stop them. Yes, there are exceptions. No, this isn't applicable on all issues, all the time. But I believe with all my heart that if we are to take individual *rights* seriously, then we must take individual *responsibility* and *agency* just as seriously. Even self-destructive agency. Even in the age of COVID-19. Especially in the age of COVID-19.

There are three common and important circumstances, however, where this choice to NOT interact doesn't exist, where the rights of yes, even idiots, to liberty and the pursuit of happiness as they understand it will inexorably come into conflict with the right to life of those who understand all too well the highly contagious and dangerous biology of this virus.

Only government can provide the necessary resources and the necessary coordination to resolve these conflicts of rights peacefully and without trampling the rights of one set of citizens or another.

You have no idea how much it pains me to say that.

It pains me because I think there's a snowball's chance in hell that our government will do that.

Here's how a legitimate government would deal with the three inevitable and irreconcilable conflicts of rights in the age of COVID-19.

- 1) Healthcare workers and first responders *have no choice* but to risk their right to life in caring for all citizens who are sick, regardless of the agency or lack thereof behind that sickness. How does a legitimate government resolve this conflict? **By mobilizing on a war-time basis to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to ALL healthcare workers and social workers and first responders and public safety officers and anyone else who must serve the sick.**
- 2) Workers who believe that their employer does not provide sufficient protection against this virus *have no choice* but to risk their right to life in their return to work, as unemployment insurance typically is unavailable for people who "voluntarily" quit their job. How does a legitimate government resolve this conflict? **By providing a Federal safe harbor to unemployment claims based on COVID-19 safety concerns, AND by maintaining unemployment benefits at the current (higher) CARES Act level throughout the crisis.**

- 3) All citizens who use public transit or use public facilities *have no choice* but to trust that their fellow citizens share a common respect for the rights of others, even if they may differ in their risk tolerance and private beliefs regarding the biology of the virus. How does a legitimate government resolve this conflict? **By mobilizing on a war-time basis to provide ubiquitous rapid testing in and around all public spaces, starting today with symptom testing (temperature checks) and required masking to limit asymptomatic spread, and implementing over time near-instant antigen tests as they are developed.**

It's just not that hard.

But it is impossible. Politically impossible.

So what do we do?



"I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing."

-- **Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947)**

We do what we can. We howl our discontent. We resist. We help our neighbors. We make. We protect. We teach. We keep the small-l liberal virtues and the small-c conservative virtues alive in our hearts and our minds.

So what do we do?

For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing.

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