

Coronavirus vs. the Non-Identity Problem

Many people think that if Hillary Clinton had won in 2016, the coronavirus crisis would have been less severe. On reflection, this is a drastic understatement. If Hillary Clinton had won in 2016, it is *near-certain that the coronavirus crisis never would have started*.

To see why, let's review what philosophers call the Non-Identity Problem. Consider the following statement: "If my parents had won the lottery before my conception, I would be rich today." Sounds true, right? On reflection, however, you should rather say, "If my parents had won the lottery before my conception, I never would have existed." Why not? Because winning a pile of money would have changed when you parents had sex, which would have changed which of your father's hundreds of millions of sperm impregnated your mother. Indeed, even if the timing of the sex was unchanged, winning the lottery would have led your father to jump for joy, reshuffling his sperm, and again nullifying your existence.

Philosophers often invoke the Non-Identity Problem when they imagine one of our descendants moaning, "If only our ancestors had stopped polluting, I'd be better off." While it's true we can help our descendants, the very acts of helping them changes *who our descendants will be*. If we had cared more about the future, the moaners wouldn't have been around to moan.

What on Earth does this have to do with coronavirus? Simple: *The birth of a new pathogen biologically parallels the birth of a new human*. A new virus is the result of a perfect genetic storm – DNAs ultra-improbably combine, then ultra-improbably get into a human body, then ultra-improbably infect that body with an ultra-low viral dose instead of being destroyed by the host's immune system. That's why new pathogens are so thankfully rare; the odds are stacked massively against the rise of any specific strain. If matters were otherwise, virologists would detect what arson investigators call "multiple points of origin" for novel pathogens. To the best of my knowledge, they almost never do.

Given this knife-edge origin process, it is extremely likely that *any* major change in the events prior to the rise of coronavirus would have precluded the rise of coronavirus. Hillary's election would have led to different Chinese policies, which would have reshuffled human behavior in China, implying no coronavirus.

Doesn't the same go for thousands of other changes? Absolutely. If Trump had negotiated a different trade deal with China, coronavirus would never have happened. If China had left the Uighurs alone, coronavirus would never have happened. Indeed, if *Avengers: Endgame* had been released a week later, coronavirus would have never happened; the movie grossed \$614M in China, so it must have indirectly changed the space-time positions

of a bunch of people in Wuhan. If something alters which humans are born, it can also easily alter which pathogens are born.

Wait, does this mean that if Hillary had won, we could have had a worse virus instead? Absolutely! Given how bad this virus has been, however, that's unlikely. If Hitler had never been born, maybe Germany would have been taken over by an even more bloodthirsty dictator, but smart money says otherwise. Nevertheless, over the very long-run, the uncertainty becomes great indeed. Without Hitler, World War II could have been fought fifteen years later... with nuclear weapons. As Tyler explained a while back:

For small changes to translate into large final effects, we need only postulate that some individuals, or some leaders, play a significant role on the global stage. Even if most individuals do not matter, or most small changes wash out, some of the small changes today will alter future identities, once we look a generation or two into the future. So the argument requires only that a very small number of personal identities matter for the course of history. If Hitler's great-great-grandfather had bent down to pick one more daisy, many of the effects might have washed out; nonetheless Europe today would be a very different place.

In my experience, non-philosophers stridently resist non-identity arguments. But that's their problem. The arguments are sound. Whenever the conception of a crucial critter is on the line, small events have massive consequences. The crucial critter could be a human or virus. Strange but true: This whole mess could have been avoided if Chris Hemsworth had a minor accident while shooting the latest *Avengers* movie.