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Coronavirus and the Hole in the Big Other

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This pandemic has struck, and unlike prior epidemics and pandemics, we – scientists, physicians, the general public – do not know a lot about it. The infectious agent is new, new to science, in addition to being a novel infection in humans. Obviously, scientists are acting fast to learn about the organism, and infectious disease specialists are acting fast to learn how to treat it, and public health experts are trying to develop means of preventing or minimizing spread of the organism, but all that said – we just don't know a lot now.

So, we are confronted with a big lack in the Other. And, speaking beings have a difficult time tolerating this kind of lack of knowledge, this void. So, as happens in so many other situations, people fill up this hole with something, often that very thing which defines how they engage the world. In the psychoanalytic community, we call this fantasy, and we see these fantasies, these opinions, these perspectives about what is happening take so many different forms. For some, this is a catastrophic event, an apocalyptic event, leading to a great deal of fear of the unknown. For others, feeling immune from any possible impact of the Other on them, this is no big deal, something that will pass, nothing to worry about. And, then, there are those imagining agents of one sort or another as the actor behind what is happening. These individual perspectives on what is happening often say more about the person with them, obviously, than the situation that the person is describing.

And then, regarding the issue of what to do in response to this thing, we see a similar range of approaches. In some cases, people will decide to do nothing, change nothing in their lives, in response to the pandemic. Others figure that they will just get it, accepting infection as a necessity or destiny that they will face. Then, others will take action. Some obviously follow the public health recommendations that are given. Others jump into action, stockpiling supplies of food, water (without reason for that), and household goods. Then, still, others take unusual precautions or follow the advice of scientifically discredited people selling one cure or another that can be found all over the internet now.

We see too, taking the matter socially, that in the face of a decline in the place of authority in the big Other, manifested, in the United States, in the lack of confidence or trust in the government (and the intense divisiveness in American politics today), that the national authorities that should drive the response struggle to act. This leaves municipalities, corporations, health systems, and universities organizing the response at more local levels. In these situations, some public and private institutions do what should be done in the face of a

pandemic, which is to rely on infectious disease and public health expertise to guide response on the social level. For, while much is unknown now, the scientific and medical communities have remarkable abilities to gather together and develop coordinated responses to events such as this.

But, meanwhile, we can observe a blossoming of personal fears, anxieties, or irrational exuberances, and a broad range of choices of action, as people struggle to direct their attention to this pandemic.

If psychoanalysis has something to offer here, it is to recognize – in the process of the unveiling that occurs in the analytic experience – the proper place of the lack in the Other, and the very personal nature of the fantasies we make to cover over it, so that people can soberly address the unknown and ineffable aspects of the human experience.

By [Thomas Svolos](#) | March 14th, 2020 | [COVID-19 / 2020 #1](#)

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