

The only silver lining coronavirus can provide is that ...

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I am well aware that human behaviour tends to revert to the norm. I suspect we all know that. Our assumption is that after periods of disruption - whatever their cause - things go back to normal. Quite surprisingly, whatever the crisis we have faced, and whatever it has imposed on us, life after periods of trauma very often looks quite like life before that trauma happened, at least for those who survived the event, if fatalities occurred. Our ability to adapt and then survive is one of the qualities that has ensured homo sapiens are still around, and in ever larger numbers.

There are limits to this heuristic explanation of life going on though. Because of course, things do change. Sometimes that's for the better. And sometimes not. Individually this is of course more apparent than collectively: by definition median changes are very much smaller than those observed in some outlying cases: statistically that has to be true. But even so collectively, experience changes us. It takes only the most cursory reflection to appreciate that as societies the rate of change has been quite staggering over recent lifetimes: medians are not, by any means fixed. Our reversion to norms is not absolute.

Some of these changes are chosen. In fact, of late a great many have been. For large numbers, but by no means all people and let alone everywhere, recent decades have given rise to apparently untold opportunity. Choice has become a touchstone. It's almost axiomatic that people want the supposed freedoms it provides. The constraints have been ignored. And somehow, and I stress the somehow, we have (and that's a collective we) managed this process, although the rise in mental ill health, which I think is real, is some indication that not all might be as good as it superficially appears.

And now coronavirus threatens this trajectory of change. Of course the appearance of coronavirus is, in itself, shocking. It is the paradox of living that we must assume, for at least most of our lives, that we will live without limit whilst knowing somewhere, deep down, that this is not true. Coming to terms with our mortality is something most of us would wish to defer. Coronavirus disrupts that. It imposes the prospect of sudden and unexpected (but for most, pretty unlikely) death upon us. No wonder it is so unpopular,

and so greatly feared. It is, quite literally, something we do not want to think about, but have no choice but address. We, and those we love, are at risk. That's shocking when we live presuming otherwise.

And yet, we knew about this risk already. After all, coronavirus almost certainly represents a much smaller threat to our well-being than other now known threats, of which the climate crisis is by far the most obvious. The only thing that differentiates coronavirus is its immediacy, and the fact that it appears so obviously physically threatening. In contrast, the need to tackle the climate crisis appears capable of being deferred. And we can (and most do) still pretend that we can all survive temperature changes that science suggests are profoundly threatening to our collective wellbeing.

To some degree the prioritisation of the threat from coronavirus is rational: it is the immediate crisis that we face. I think it is going to be profoundly more uncomfortable than others appear to do. Those small-minded landlords who have been appearing on the site for the last couple of days suggesting that I am proposing revolution when all I have actually been offering is my best assessment of the collective economic risks that we face, and how to ensure that as many as possible survive such threats in reasonable financial shape to ensure that the landlords in question still have tenants who might be able to pay rent in the future, are a sure sign that many people's risk appraisals, and sense of priorities, are profoundly wrong in the light of the collective nature of the problem that we will face. But, coronavirus will eventually be self-limiting: whether a virus is developed in time or not, those who survive it (and most will do so) will develop an immunity to reinfection, and the threat from it will diminish. That is its inevitable trajectory.

But the threat from climate change will only increase. That too is its inevitable trajectory, unless we take the appropriate actions, of course. That includes targeting net-zero carbon vastly quicker than we are at present. And the costs of not doing so will be much higher than any coronavirus will impose.

So will coronavirus prevent us returning to the norm that we 'enjoyed'? Will travel patterns really change? Will the world appreciate that globalisation is not the answer to all questions? And that the pursuit for 'free trade' is not worth trashing the economy for? Will there be an awareness that we have to live differently? Will, once we get used to the idea that choice has to be severely restricted to deal with a crisis - and this will be happening soon if coronavirus is to be managed - we accept that some constraints are also necessary to manage the climate crisis?

Will we, in other words, revert to the norm, or will that median behaviour, and what we expect of it, change?

I accept the political accusation that I believe that this is necessary. If I have an agenda it is our collective survival. It would seem some prefer to prioritise their own short-term economic wellbeing, as they see it. And I admit, I find the naked pursuit of that agenda

profoundly unattractive. It's hardly unusual to think so, but comments on this blog would suggest it was. What I do know is that the challenge of the climate crisis, which requires the trade off of short term gratification against the long term communal good, is the challenge that we now really face.

Nothing about the coronavirus crisis is welcome. But it's vital that we learn from it. Reverting to the patterns of behaviour that we have 'enjoyed' is not an option for the long term. Coronavirus might just help us see that. I do not pretend that this will be a great silver lining. But it may be the best one we will find.