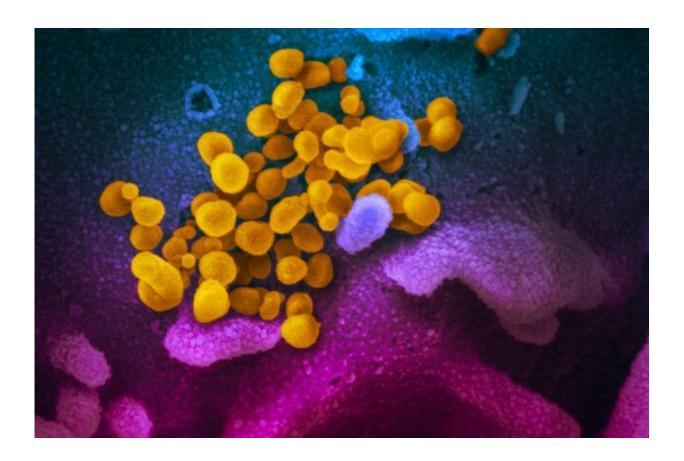# After the crisis: How to avoid (some of) our misleading beliefs

May 19 2020, by Anne-Laure Sellier

This scanning electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 (yellow)—also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19—isolated from a patient, emerging from the surface of cells (blue/pink) cultured in the lab. Credit: NIAID-RML

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his colleague and friend

Amos Tversky formalized the concept of "cognitive bias" in 1972, and considerable research since then has shown that our brain finds it remarkably difficult to make rational decisions. Cognitive biases refer to deviations from a rational treatment of information. They can have dramatically negative consequences in the business, military, political and medical sphere.

A blatant illustration of how dangerous cognitive biases can be is confirmation bias—the tendency we all have to disproportionately seek information that confirms our existing beliefs. This bias actively contributed to the Iranian decision to shoot down flight PS752 on January 8, 2020, killing the 176 passengers on board. The media called it "human error" at the time. Confirmation bias was also deemed partly responsible for United States' decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

With the coronavirus crisis, this bias has hit us with all its might. Whether we consider the delays in deciding to close countries' borders, the tardy decision to start (or restart) mass-producing masks and ventilators, the discovery that COVID-19 was in Italy weeks after it had already begun to kill Italians, just as the decision each of us makes to go outside because "we need to," and the remarkably solid belief in some parts of the world that things are "not as bad as they seem." The consequences are the devastating (underestimated) death figures that every country affected continuously chimes out.

How to mitigate confirmation bias

If most of the manifestations of this bias are hard to take control of, this article proposes to focus on two types of decisions that each of us can actively work on to mitigate confirmation bias. The first type of decision is that of leaving your home. Let's start with a simple, even though unrealistic, observation: if we could freeze everyone in the world for 15 days with at least 2 meters between each person, the virus would be

eradicated. We live a prophecy that French philosopher, scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal shared with us more than 300 years ago: ["All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone"](#).

Of course, we cannot freeze in place for 15 days—there are a number of outings we must do, whether to get food, or help vulnerable others through the confinement. But are these the only reasons we go out? Can't you further reduce the number of times you go out shopping? Must you go out for exercise? Could you work out at home instead? If you have people confined with you, ask them how necessary your going out truly is, in the light of disconfirming arguments. Every time we choose to go out, it feels as an insignificant, microdecision, but we know the significant impact that it can have down the transmission chain. This, we all understand rationally, enough media rehashed it since lockdown started. #StayHome, #IoRestoaCasa, #JeRestealaMaison. To what extent do you rationally apply this to yourself?

A second type of [decision](#) that we need to urgently tackle is what we will actually implement the "day after." Here, it is noteworthy that a "return to normal" fantasy is fast spreading. Companies project ["a return to normal in 2021"](#). "Our [annual meeting](#) gathering thousands of attendees will take place right after things get back to normal," an event organizer tells me, inviting me to join him there…

But what does going back to normal even mean, when it will be a possibly unprecedented [worldwide recession](#), directly causing millions to experience financial and material difficulties? Should we even wish for things to go back to normal? Plenty of data show that going back to "normal" would be one of the worst possible crisis exits that we could envision. The old "normal" was famously problematic for too many reasons:

10% of the world's population lived on less than $1.90 a day. This translates in 21% of US children living below the federal poverty threshold; in the UK, it is almost a third, while it hovers around 20% in France. These figures will likely markedly rise as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

- 33% of the worldwide agricultural production destined to human consumption was wasted, while 1 in every 9 people was not eating as much as they needed.
- Between 15 and 125 million Europeans suffered from energy precarity, not only due to high energy prices, but also to vast energy inefficiency, with computers' use deemed "useful" representing only 60% of the time that they are powered on.
- Air traffic was claimed to double between 2019 and 2037, when, in 2018, it already represented 5% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. In spite of these sparkling clear data and the numerous calls for rationing flights, in the old "normal," every one of us could go all over the globe ad libitum.

Creating sustainable value

In 1962, the American philosopher John L. Austin warned us that we "do things with words." How about we forbid ourselves to talk about going back to normal, to rethink instead our economy, in order to create sustainable value for most of us? Time is running out, the virus will disappear and the old "normal" will quickly spread back into our days, with its hectic pace and its disastrous consequences.

Lockdown time has a unique quality to it, which already fascinated French historian Fernand Braudel, who wrote from memory his masterpiece "The Mediterranean" while in a German prison, between 1940 and 1945. He used a telegraphic style to write to a friend : "Believe that without captivity, would never have obtained this lucidity. […]

captivity […] allows long meditation of a topic." Since March, half of humanity lives in a glass case. The Earth is closed. Maybe so we can truly hop off and better catch our breath for what's to come?

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