



## DOCUMENT

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# Principles of Coronademonology

Challenged to imagine the virus as a demon, Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, author of Omnicide, sets out eleven brief principles of demonic entities.

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(1) Demons manipulate primarily through desire (if one pictures deals with the devil, or genies coming from magic lamps, they always come with the temptation of possibilities or fortunes). But there is a twist there, which is that demons better than anyone else understand the first secret of both psychoanalysis and Arabian wish stories: that we humans misunderstand our own desire; that we don't know what we actually want, and therefore always wish for the wrong things (most often things that will fatally undo us). So the Devil is often mischaracterized as a liar or cheater when in fact he is the most transparently honest and ethical of celestial figures: he makes you sign a contract; there is nothing enigmatic or cryptic in that gesture; he even lets you establish the exact terms of the deal, but then he bets on the human subject's inevitable miscalculation of their own desire that will lead them to making the wrong selection. That's why, when the Devil

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### Demons manipulate primarily through desire

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comes to collect eventually, people act shocked or betrayed: But why? Not because the Devil broke the rules of the agreement; it's because they themselves chose incorrectly and are horrified at feeling unfulfilled. As a consequence, in the Islamic tradition the Devil is known as the choice-giver; he doesn't necessarily mislead, but rather flings doors open constantly and compels human souls to make perilous decisions (usually surrounding ambition or indulgence). Similarly, the virus appears to be testing us

in this same demonic way: it is watching us collapse and fall apart psychologically and socially, hanging its victory above all else on our inability to fathom what matters and what we want to do in this dire circumstance. Everywhere you look in social and political discourse these days, the human species is misunderstanding itself over and again.

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### Some fall into hysteria, others into surrender, others cynicism, others extreme anger or sorrow

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(2) Demons choose their subjects individually and whimsically (often according to circumstance), not universally or preferentially the way gods do. And this showcases the relation between being chosen as simultaneously honor and curse: it means that one is elected to make payments to the passing fiend or the ghoul, and that the demon devises a highly specific lure or affective zone to suit the tastes of its victim. Gods throw out blanket commandments, but the demon devises a micro-climate for each interlocutor. Similarly, we see the virus having different idiosyncratic impacts upon the bodies and minds of individuals it touches: some fall into hysteria, others into surrender, others cynicism, others extreme anger or sorrow. It does not operate as a universal law, which is how divinity imposes itself, but plays across a fractal arrangement of varying atmospheres, moods, and sensations.

(3) Demons are often vampiric, and to an extent the pandemic has a vampiric methodology. First off, then, I should clarify two details that I learned years ago from a brilliant colleague of mine, Dejan Lukic, who is East European and knows many things about the folkloric origins of vampires: firstly, one thing that we get wrong in modern portrayals is that the vampire's bite, in its earliest descriptions, was never a source of pain but always a sensation of pure ecstasy. What was terrifying, if anything, was the excess of pleasure associated with the fangs; and secondly, that

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cultural fascinations with vampires usually explode right before the collapse of an empire. These are usually moments of great socio-political instability when suddenly people begin experiencing paranoia of vampiric creatures lurking about, and the reason for this is that vampires represent an alternative royalty or aristocratic paradigm. Think about it: Kings pass on their dynasties through bloodlines; and vampires also establish their own counter-bloodline, which is why they are a threat to structures of authority. So I am intrigued by this notion of how the current virus resembles this vampiric influence in the sense that: (1) the illness turns us into itself, just like vampires turn us into themselves.; and (2) it obsolesces all our prior identity-formations; one by one, it is superseding and sabotaging our previous political, economic, social, and cultural personas and shows what a fragile house of cards so-called reality was to begin with. And lastly, in thinking of the euphoria of the vampire's bite mentioned before, whenever talking about a plague condition there is a disturbing side-issue that no one likes to address which is that there are always small groups of bug-givers and bug-chasers who find some rapture in the logic of spreading contagion.

(4) Demons have acutely specific powers, unlike gods who have totalizing abilities of omniscience and omnipotence. So some demons miraculously can levitate or read minds; some dwell in natural phenomena like forests or deserts while others can control elements; some can ventriloquize voices and others can seduce strangers. In a corresponding

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fashion, this virus has highly particularized modalities: it does not affect every organ but rather exclusive sectors of bodies; it induces certain specific reactions; it spreads by certain specific channels. So this enables us to think theoretically about partial powers, in the same sense in which mediaeval martial artists never considered themselves absolute masters of movement or violence but rather only experts of one school or animal form.

(5) Demons are stealthy and amorphous: they have an elite understanding of camouflage and shape-shifting. That's why gods usually have statues and temples but demon-cults are generally embodied in the form of idols—because the idol is miniature, lightweight, portable, and easily concealed—not to mention that it plays upon our primordial fear of small things (the spider, the snake). And obviously with a microscopic virus, the threat there is similarly one of its imperceptibility (that it strikes asymmetrically and in almost invisible waves) and also its metamorphosis (that it is constantly transfiguring). These have always been criteria of the demonic.

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### **Demons are stealthy and amorphous**

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(6) Demons compel us to live with them: Right now people are trying to do their best to envision the virus as an all-or-nothing scenario. Either you have it or you don't; either things will return to full normality or will remain in this psychotic suspension forever or even approach a doomsday extinction of the race. But all of this is a cover-up of the more grave and disturbing possibility, which is that this could be seasonal, which means we have to accept cyclical resurgences, or that there will simply be lifelong effects upon us physiologically. Meaning that we may end up living with the virus in the same way that someone who suffers mutilation afterwards always walks with the limp or feels sharp pain when it rains. I vaguely remember decades ago reading an obscure anthropological work about a Moroccan man (some rural fellow) who genuinely believed that he had married a jinn. He claimed that the female jinn

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one day stole into his shack and compelled him into an eternal marriage bond, and he went about his daily business conversing with this formless being and setting the dinner table for her right in front of the anthropologist and describing his life with her as something ordinary. So we too might consider the pale alternative of having to exist always within the pandemic's shadow, which means sharing lived space with the demon.

(7) Demons sometimes save the world: Pagan civilizations were so much more complex in their orchestrations of good and evil than later monotheistic narratives. You see, on rare occasions in ancient myths, the demon gods would rise to the occasion of defending the universe. For instance, in the Egyptian pantheon you have Set, whose name etymologically later becomes Satan in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic

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## Demons sometimes save the world

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tradition, and Set is a trickster god who rules over chaos, foreigners, and the desert, and whose head looks like something that doesn't exist among creatures in nature (it's like a hybrid of a jackal and an anteater). Anyway, Set is a sometimes cruel, greedy, or vindictive deity who tries to overthrow the more archetypal leaders of the gods. But on some strange nights, when the more heroic gods are in chains or wounded, Set alone comes to rescue the world from terminal downfall. And he does this not out of any messianic delusions or altruistic outlook but rather just for the hell of it. This is something we also notice in postmodern or futuristic cinema and literature—even in films like *Blade Runner* or *The Matrix*—where the protagonist is some misanthropic loner or outcast who is called upon to fight for the human race. But they could just as easily throw us into the ocean. Jose Saramago's last novel, entitled *Cain*, is exactly about this mercurial type of figure, since in his story Cain wanders the earth, often intervening to preserve the sacred realm, but just

as often subverting it viciously. This virus is also an amoral phenomenon, which means it could threaten to end us or it could offer us redemption, or simultaneously both. And this fact, by the way, also divulges the great strategic advantage of evil over good: namely, that the good can never commit evil if it wants to retain its absolute purity, but evil knows of the good, and can even do good, especially when to do so suits its purposes.

(8) Demons often give false ways out. Getting back to Middle Eastern jinn, there are all kinds of stories about jinn who love granting escapes or cures that presumably will let one elude danger only to eventually throw them right back into the whirlpool again. So these are demons who delight in offering false choices or false hope: they make deals of release only then to kill their human associates from another angle, promising ways out only to dam them between four walls again; so they tease and play with their prey in cat-like fashion. In that sense, this is also the architecture of the labyrinth, where the farther in you go the more lost and condemned you become to having no way out. Bringing that full circle to the pandemic, we can wonder whether this virus is also allowing us to endlessly debate vaccines and policies all the while knowing that we are actually caught in a no-win situation. That would definitely make it demonic by definition.

(9) Demon races often hide their interventions behind the cover of accident. In Iran, grandmothers will typically curse the jinn if they lose an article of clothing or misplace an object, meaning that they suspect seemingly random occurrences to be the mischievous work of the jinn. This is even how the great Henri Michaux describes sorcerers in what he calls the Land of Magic. He says that every time you witness an apparently spontaneous occurrence, like forgetting your train of thought while talking or tripping on the stairs, you should rest assured that this is a spell of the magus who is deliberately leading you astray. So if we honestly want to draw a

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correct parallel between the virus and demonology, then you would say that the virus also masks itself behind the veil of contingency or chance or dumb luck while all the time, phenomena are being guided by malevolent will.

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## The virus masks itself behind the veil of contingency

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(10) Demons make you talk to yourself by appearing as voices within your head (think of possession and exorcist scenes), and there is a literal connection here since most people infected with the virus fall into fever-states where they speak deliriously to themselves. That said, schizophrenia is often diagnostically associated with this condition of hearing voices—schizophrenics are susceptible to auditory hallucinations that grow increasingly loud, aggressive, painful, and persuasive over time—and also schizophrenics have a defective recognition circuit where their minds supposedly fail to identify their own internal voices. What most people typically have is something called sub-vocal speech where under your breath you talk to yourself or mutter something, whether out of frustration or to remind yourself to do something, and we immediately recognize that as a conversation with ourselves, whereas to the schizophrenic's consciousness it appears as the voice of others infiltrating them from the outside. I wonder, then, to what extent the virus is an outsider voice—and to what extent it's maybe an unrecognized echo of our own. We are talking about 'it' constantly, when maybe we should be saying 'us'.

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## We are talking about 'it' constantly, when maybe we should be saying 'us'

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(11) Demons bring out the best talents of the storyteller. Something that I have written about before is sleep demons: they are described vividly in different forms by different cultures to explain sleep paralysis (when your mind awakens in bed but your body remains asleep), and almost always people experience the same terror of envisioning a creature sitting upon their chest and stopping them from making any movements. And it captivates how ingenious the tales are surrounding this supposed demonic creature: the Scandinavians talk about an incubus or

succubus ('accursed woman') who crouches on the rib cages of unsuspecting sleepers to cause them nightmares, whereas the swampland folklore of the American South speaks of the haint ('old hag' or 'night hag') who constrains your breath by straddling the victim's upper body, while Pacific Islanders refer to a possessive process called *kana tevoro* (meaning 'being eaten by a demon') through which dead relatives' spirits do soul-feeding on you, and Mongolian shamans of the Dark have coined the notion *khar darakh* (which means 'to be pressed by the Black') in which the polluted shadow-dimensions of the universe themselves are at work; the Turkish concept of *karabasan* (meaning 'the dark presser') is a jinn whose stranglehold can be released only by reciting the Throne Verse from the Qur'an, and there are numerous further versions such as the Bangladeshi idea of *boba* (whose name means 'speechlessness'), the Nepalese *Khyaak* (a ghost living beneath the house's staircase), the Nigerian *ogun oru* (meaning 'nocturnal warfare'), or the Kurdish *Motakka* (who's an attacker of children for reasons of jealousy, familial feuding, or moral punishment). So you have

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this creative assortment of demons associated with goblin lore, specters, scorned wives, whatever, that extends almost endlessly: just a couple of further examples, then, the sleep demon in German folktales is called *Alptraum* ('elf dream') who parasitically drinks blood from male and female breasts and tangles sleepers' hair into elfknots, fearing only the sign of the Cross; the Catalan *Pesanta* is a massive dog with steel paws that bewitches sleepers by laying on their torsos; or the Brazilian *pisadeira* (meaning 'she who steps'), always takes the shape of an old woman with white disheveled hair, bloodshot eyes, foul green nails, and cackling laughter, and she waits on rooftops to jump onto the full stomachs of those in beds below. Lastly, there is the old Persian name of the sleep paralysis creature as *Bakhtak* (literally meaning 'small fortune'); he is a little being with a distended stomach that amuses itself by smothering you and dismantling your nerve-endings to create numbness. But the trick with *Bakhtak* is that you can supposedly turn his spiritual and physical invasion into a stroke of freakish luck. So in one rendition,

upon waking in the sleep paralysis state one must somehow claw Bakhtak's nose from its face, revealing its deformity in the moonlight, whereas another rendition encourages the waking sleeper to snatch Bakhtak's hat to expose its bald head. In either instance, this allows you to enslave the demon to share treasure or grant continual wishes...but then the problem is, you're right back in the hands of Principle 1, that demons grant wishes—which, as we said already, is the greatest of the demon's traps.

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