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Eric Rasmusen, [erasmuse@Indiana.edu](mailto:erasmuse@Indiana.edu)

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**How the Coronavirus Infects Our Brains: The Idols of the Forum**

**LONG VERSION**

The coronavirus epidemic has not showed American thinking at its best. Bureaucrats, politicians, voters, and reporters have been running around like chickens with their heads cut off. It’s a great illustration of [Francis Bacon’s Four Idols of the Mind](http://www.sirbacon.org/links/4idols.htm), four kinds of fallacious thinking.

Idols of the Tribe are mistakes that arise from human nature: we all get scared by stories of young marathon runners dying from coronavirus, even if we know they’re one in a million. Idols of the Cave arise from the blinders of culture and training: the FDA’s mindset is to make sure imperfect tests aren’t used, and that’s what they did till the politicians cracked down and said a pretty good virus test in March was better than a perfect test in July. Idols of the Theatre arise from fallacious systems of thought: the epidemiologists’ standard SIR model assumes that the rate of spread is constant over time, ignoring the fact that a scared population takes more precautions so the rate of spread falls.

It is the fourth category, [Idols of the Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idola_fori), that I’d like say more about. These are mistakes that arise from thinking in terms of words, not reality. We need language for thinking, to be sure. Babies can think, but they’re bad at it. The problem is that words fool you if you don’t pay attention to what they mean; what Confucius called  [“The Rectification of Names”](https://china.usc.edu/confucius-analects-13). "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.” The rectification of names is a constant thread running from Ockham to Luther to Hume to our modern analytic philosophy.

The name that needs to be rectified today is “essential”. [**Inigo Montoya said:**](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/you-keep-using-that-word-i-do-not-think-it-means-what-you-think-it-means)  **"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." DO NOT THINK IN TERMS OF “ESSENTIAL SERVICES”!** Nothing is essential but God. Services are not “essential”. They are “more useful” and “less useful” along a continuum. If you try to put services into one of two boxes, essential and non-essential, you’ll ruin your brain and you’ll look silly. Jesus [told](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+4%3A4&version=KJV) Satan, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. Church is as essential as groceries. Friendship is as important as liquor stores. Earning a living is as necessary as shopping at Wal-Mart.

There’s another probelm. When you think in terms of “essential” and “non-essential”, you lose track of the dimension: “likelihood of spreading the virus”. We need to balance usefulness and spread. Why are we closing campgrounds, libraries, and plant nurseries while keeping walk-in pharmacies open? Pharmacies are full of sick people coughing on each other, and pharmacies already have drive-in windows that work great for picking up pills.

Remember the goal: to keep people from coughing, sneezing, and spitting on each other. We need think of ways to keep sick people home, rather than letting them go to grocery stores, pharmacies, and big-box stores even if they have a raging fever and a tight chest, which is our current policy. Set up a hotline sick people can call to get free state-paid delivery service, for example. In Taiwan, the government arrests quarantined people who leave their home—but it takes care of all their needs, too. Taiwan is both tougher and more compassionate--- and they’re controlling coronavirus a lot better than we are. Don’t be enslaved by words. Think about reality.