

Viewpoint: We still don't know where COVID truly came from. Should we be concerned?

Where did it come from? More than three years into the pandemic and untold millions of people dead, that question about the Covid-19 coronavirus remains controversial and fraught, with facts sparkling amid a tangle of analyses and hypotheticals like Christmas lights strung on a dark, thorny tree.

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Some contrarians say that it doesn't matter, the source of the virus. What matters, they say, is how we cope with the catastrophe it has brought, the illness and death it continues to cause. Those contrarians are wrong. It does matter. Research priorities, pandemic preparedness around the world, health policies and public opinion toward science itself will be lastingly affected by the answer to the origin question — if we ever get a definitive answer.

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Most of us don't reach our opinions by fastidious calibration of empirical evidence. We default to our priors, as Jesse Bloom noted, or we embrace stories that have simple plots, good and bad characters and melodramatic trajectories, and that seem commensurate in scope to the event in question. The process of scientific discovery is a complicated story involving data collection, hypothesis testing, hypothesis falsification, hypothesis revision, further testing and brilliant but fallible humans doing all that work.

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