



COVID-19 calls for virtue ethics

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ABSTRACT

The global spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) has led to the imposition of severely restrictive measures by governments in the Western hemisphere. We feel a contrast between these measures and our freedom. This contrast, we argue, is a false perception. It only appears to us because we look at the issue through our contemporary moral philosophy of utilitarianism and an understanding of freedom as absence of constraints. Both these views can be substituted with more sophisticated alternatives, namely an ethics of virtue and a notion of freedom of the will. These offer a fuller picture of morality and enable us to cooperate with the current restrictions by consciously choosing to adhere to them instead of perceiving them as draconian and immoral. We ask whether we should collaborate with the restrictions and argue that considerations of virtue will lead to an affirmative answer. More broadly, virtue ethics permits to deal with the practical concerns about how an individual should behave during this pandemic, given the current lockdown measures or lack thereof. In section 1, we present how utilitarianism and a notion of freedom as negative liberty support the opposition to restrictive measures. In section 2, we outline an alternative based on an ethics of virtue and a more elaborated notion of free will. In the concluding section 3, we argue that considerations of virtue should guide the individual and public response to the emergency.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, freedom, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, will

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INTRODUCTION

We currently feel a tension between governments that lock down entire countries to delay the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the freedom we enjoy and aim to defend. Dr Redlener, Director of Columbia University's National Centre for Disaster Preparedness, voiced these concerns with restrictive measures: 'It is just part of our culture. It is just the antithesis of the freedoms that we theoretically have.'¹ Such comments lead to the natural questions: How so? Why do we perceive this tension when our actions may help the weak in our communities? Why should we collaborate with the restrictions?

We provide a philosophical analysis able to answer these questions. In particular, the aim of the paper is to illustrate an ethical framework that enables the individual to rationally cooperate with current restrictions because it is morally justified given the circumstances. We are dealing with the live question of practical concern how an individual should behave during this pandemic, given the current lockdown measures or lack thereof.² In the first section, we argue that the resistance felt towards restrictive measures can be explained by two major ethical convictions: utilitarianism and freedom as the absence of constraints. However, these two frameworks cannot account for why it seems ethical to the general public to collaborate with the restrictions. In the second section, we offer an alternative perspective: virtue ethics and a more elaborated notion of freedom. In the concluding third section, we argue that these offer a fuller picture of morality and human actions that enables us to cooperate with the current restrictions by consciously choosing to adhere to them instead of perceiving them as draconian and immoral.

WHAT SURROUNDS US: UTILITARIANISM AND NEGATIVE LIBERTY

We live in a society permeated by two major ethical convictions: *utilitarianism* and the understanding of *freedom as absence of constraints*. The former holds that actions are morally evaluated on the basis of their consequences and that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good; the latter sees freedom as mere lack of external restrictions to one's actions.

Utilitarianism is a special case of consequentialism³ and regards as right only those actions that maximize the total net amount of pleasure for all sentient beings. This view is associated with Bentham and Mill⁴ and deeply inserted into our society: Most of our actions follow such principles. Utilitarianism has dominated the recent debate on government responses to the outbreak. Many have claimed that overall, the anticipated death toll is not too high (not higher than that of a seasonal flu, say), that allegedly only (or predominantly) old and weak people will require hospitalization and that the

1 Max Matza, *Coronavirus: Could the US do What Italy has Done?* BBC News US & Canada, Mar. 11, 2020, online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51804664> (accessed Mar. 18, 2020).

2 The question whether lockdowns themselves were legitimate we are not currently raising. Considerations of virtue may indicate that such a policy choice is prudent and hence morally justified.

3 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Consequentialism*, in THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY SUMMER 2019 EDITION, online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/consequentialism> (accessed Mar. 18, 2020).

4 John S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in ON LIBERTY, UTILITARIANISM AND OTHER ESSAYS 113–178 (Mark Philp and Frederick Rosen ed., 2015).

adverse impact that a lockdown will have on the economy will damage many more people than the ones physically affected by this disease. Hence, young and strong people should not worry and should go on with their activities as normal.

Freedom is generally taken to be the absence of external restrictions. Isaiah Berlin labeled this conception of freedom *negative liberty*.⁵ Unwelcome constrictions may prevent us from reaching well-desired pleasure. Any form of control or external imposition is regarded as a threat to the possibility of maximizing pleasure, hence as a threat to morality (Martin Bull's recent post on the LSE's EUROPP blog is a case in point).⁶ This explains the general public's resistance to respecting containment measures and the reluctance of the UK's government to follow Italy's lead: restrictive measures, repeatedly called "draconian" in the media, not only prevent us from doing all the activities that provide us with pleasure, but they inflict pain on us. Self-isolation is difficult. Again, the number of people expected to suffer from the disease is relatively low compared to the total population, such that extended containment measures seem not to be worth the cost.

In sum, utilitarianism is the current most common moral theory that explains both the reaction and the resistance of people to renouncing their freedom in order to protect someone else.

However, the dramatic situation we are dealing with appears to point to something more. A global pandemic is, within living memory, a novel situation that affects everyone without distinction. A virus does not care about laws or government actions, or about social differences: it simply reproduces. The current situation calls everyone, with or without governments reactions, to act morally in actions and intentions. This pandemic makes us wonder whether the collaboration with the restrictive measures imposed by different European countries is really that immoral. The stories coming from hospitals of nurses or the sick make us ask whether the utilitarian account really is what we want from our morality. Is this really what we want from our freedom?⁷ We are ready to accept that our actions will have (potentially detrimental) consequences on the weak part of the population when that "weak part" is just a label, an abstract entity without face or substantiality. Things turn dramatically as soon as the "weak part" of the population turns out to be our parents, our grandparents, our friends with diseases, our neighbor who is expecting a baby. Then, we feel ready to force constraints upon us, even at the price of personal pain. We strive for more than the picture of humanity painted by utilitarianism and negative liberty.

The limits of utilitarianism are evident not only concerning individuals. The ongoing debate whether the cost of imposed lockdowns is greater than their benefits is a pertinent and necessary question at the policy level. Too often, however, it has been answered in too quick a fashion and in reductive manner by appeals to utilitarian

5 Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in *THE LIBERTY READER* 33–57 (David Miller ed., 2006), online at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315091822> (accessed Mar. 18, 2020).

6 Martin J. Bull, *Beating Covid-19: The Problem with National Lockdowns*, LSE EUROPP BLOG, Mar. 26, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/03/26/ beating-covid-19-the-problem-with-national-lockdowns/> (accessed Mar. 27, 2020).

7 We underline that we are here arguing in favor of the moral acceptability of a limitation of negative liberty because this follows from considerations of human virtues, not because the lockdown is (or not) legitimate. If the lockdown implies the limitation of negative liberty, arguing in favor of a possible limitation of negative liberty on the grounds of morality does not imply that lockdowns are morally justified.

calculus. Merely counting (quality of) lives and weighing them against each other does not take the fullness of the human condition with its individual characters, desires, and emotions into account. The same can be argued for reported subjective satisfaction with one's life.⁸ Numerical trade-offs are far from obvious, especially given the difficulty in finding a metric (if that is permissible) to quantify quality of life and the considerable uncertainty around COVID-19.⁹ Besides, we simply cannot engage in consequentialist calculus because we lack the relevant data. Thus, the current pandemic illustrates that there are no straightforward answers or fast formulae that help us determine how to behave. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the question of how to live one's daily life.

What seems clear is that the utilitarian picture is missing something and cannot offer a simple solution to the problem. A richer notion of ethics to which individuals can attain when acting or choosing how to act is required.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH: AN ETHICS OF VIRTUE AND ITS FREEDOM

Among contemporary approaches, utilitarianism is not the only moral theory. An alternative is offered by an ethics of virtue together with a more elaborated notion of freedom. Virtue ethics, inspired by Aristotle¹⁰ and re-proposed by Anscombe,¹¹ Foot,¹² and MacIntyre,¹³ regards as fundamental the importance of one's moral character in order to reach happiness, understood as *the full realization of every individual human life*.¹⁴ This notion of happiness is independent of age or relative weakness. A second important aspect of this theory is its focus on virtue. A virtue can be interpreted as a disposition that enables us to perceive, feel, want and act in certain ways. Such a notion involves a full mind-set that acknowledges the complexity of the human condition. A virtuous moral agent exercises the relevant virtue when appropriate to the circumstances. An action in accord with virtue is adequate to the circumstances at hand: The context of an actual case and its relevant particulars affect whether a certain action is to be deemed virtuous or not.¹⁵ As Aristotle says, the practical "agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action is, as doctors and

8 Cf. Peter Singer and Michael Plant, *When Will the Pandemic Cure Be Worse Than the Disease?* Project Syndicate, Apr. 6, 2020, online at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/when-will-lockdowns-be-worse-than-covid19-by-peter-singer-and-michael-plant-2020-04> (accessed May 1, 2020).

9 Even "normal" conditions allow for debate around numerical trade-offs. Cf. John M. Taurek, *Should the Numbers Count?* 6 *Philos. Public Aff.* 293–316 (1977).

10 ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, Second Edition (1999).

11 Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, 33 *Philosophy*, 1–19 (1958).

12 PHILIPPA FOOT, *VIRTUES AND VICES: AND OTHER ESSAYS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY* (2002).

13 ALASDAIR C. MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY*, Third Edition (2007).

14 We here assume a *eudaimonist* approach to virtue ethics as opposed to agent-based or exemplarist, target-centred and Platonistic virtue ethics. All of these approaches underline a link between *virtue* and *eudaimonia*, however, "for Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient—what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck. For Plato and the Stoics, virtue is both necessary and sufficient for *Eudaimonia*." Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, *Virtue Ethics*, in *THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY WINTER 2018 EDITION*, online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue/> (accessed Mar. 18, 2020).

15 Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *supra* note 11, at 13: "in an actual case, circumstances might suggest all sorts of possibility" and at 15: "circumstances can clearly make a great deal of difference in estimating justice or injustice". Cf. as well Nancy Sherman, *Moral Psychology and Virtue*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, at 754 (Roger Crisp, ed., 2013).

navigators do”.¹⁶ Such adequacy of virtues to the circumstances has two main benefits in our present context of COVID-19 pandemic. First, independent of the *existence* of any lockdown, the choice of any action should always be evaluated holistically in order to take all the relevant aspects into account. To correctly exercise a virtue means to have a moral disposition that makes the person behave adequately to the circumstances in which she finds herself. Second, virtue ethics offers a valid moral account, independent of the *type* of lockdown considered: each type of lockdowns can call us to different moral actions. If the lockdown measures imply systematic discrimination of a weak category, such as disabled or mentally ill people, then one is called to courage¹⁷ and to dissent with such behavior. If there is a lockdown such as the common European one, then one, once the reasons are understood, should exercise mainly generosity and collaborate with the restrictions. If we consider the Swedish lockdown, then one is predominantly called to prudence, being aware that one can be constantly spreading the virus. This also suggests that, according to the role one currently possesses in one’s community, some virtues become more pertinent than others: medical professionals require perseverance, policy makers prudence, parents patience but all of us should exercise generosity in our daily dealings with others.¹⁸ Hence, virtue ethics provides us with a systematic account of how to behave in certain actual circumstances that currently differ vastly across the world.

Exercising virtues during a pandemic

Let us look more precisely at the virtues relevant for the current situation. Among them are generosity, prudence, courage as well as patience, perseverance, and obedience to reasonable government action.¹⁹ For the purposes of this paper, we will here elucidate the first three in detail.

The virtue of generosity concerns giving and sharing one’s possessions for the good of others. Assisting others will leave less for oneself,²⁰ indicating some sacrificial dimension of this virtue, relevant in the current context of COVID-19. But generosity is not something obtained merely by *acting generously* or by the consequences of such actions. Granted, consequences follow from the act, but virtue ethics puts the focus on the underlying cause of that act, the virtue. While every virtue has to be trained by habit, generosity and all instances of such behavior may become an *object of our will* more easily if we reflect on what generosity is.²¹ The generous and, in this case, virtuous action is then not an imposition or constraint that limits our (possibility for) pleasure.

16 ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at II.2.4, 1104a7f.

17 See below for an outline of each of these virtues.

18 Some virtues are (predominantly) role-specific in their application, but still apply to human beings generally: “the species man, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life-powers and faculties and use of things needed—‘has’ such-and-such virtues”, Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *supra* note 11, at 14.

19 Other relevant virtues Aristotle discusses include “friendliness” which is important in “meeting people, living together and common dealings” and “avoids causing pain to others and shares pleasure” (ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at IV.6, 1126b12ff.), apparently pertinent in one’s own household and when entering public places, and what he calls “proper indignation” “concerned with [. . .] what happens to our neighbours” (*Id.* at II.8.15, 1108b2ff).

20 ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at IV.1.18, 1120b5f.

21 Analogous reasoning can be extended for all the (relevant) virtues. See section 2.2 below.

On the contrary, when we exercise generosity correctly we chose the action that mostly respects this virtue, given the circumstances. The motivations, choices, and actions of a generous person reflect her attitude towards the virtue of generosity and towards the complexity of the human condition.

The virtue of prudence we could, echoing Aristotle,²² define as the ability to correctly deliberate about what is beneficial for oneself and one's community. The prudent agent is able to rationally grasp which actions are good or bad for human beings. Currently, it would be bad for human beings to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 and to infect others. You may not know whether you are healthy or an asymptomatic infected case that has not been tested. It would therefore be prudent at the individual level, given your lack of knowledge, to practice physical distancing. Especially in the current situation, prudence may prescribe certain actions; in Aristotle's words, "its end is what action we must or must not do".²³ Consequently, this virtue is also especially pertinent at the policy level. For example, while it is true that the cost of lockdown measures may be greater (in terms of human lives even) than the benefit, we do not know. In such uncertainty, after careful consideration of all relevant factors, it may be prudent to lock a country down.

Courage or bravery concerns our appropriate feelings regarding frightening things such as contracting COVID-19 and ending up in hospital, infecting other, losing one's job or having to endure boredom or domestic stress. Aristotle discusses it at length and also treats the "bravery of citizens" caused by a desire to avoid public reproach or legal punishment.²⁴ This virtue illustrates that our emotions play an important role in our actions, especially given the current pandemic: an excessively fearless person will risk reckless exposure to the virus while someone too cowardly will never leave her house. Such emotional considerations are not accounted for by other ethical theories.

Virtue ethics claims that in our decisions, even in difficult context (maybe even more so) such as a pandemic, we should evaluate all aspects of human beings and their circumstances in order to reach a fulfilling happiness, not only regarding our pleasure, but in respecting the dignity of each human being.

The relevant account of freedom

For an action to be virtuous, the agent has to voluntarily decide on it, to rationally choose it.²⁵ We are able to decide on what we can achieve through our agency, on what is up to us.²⁶ This is possible only if the action becomes the object of the will. However, given the crucial role that virtues have in discerning which action should be done, this cannot simply happen when one has a desire and directs one's will towards

22 ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at VI.5–13, 1140b5ff.

23 *Id.* at VI.10.2, 1143a9f. Whether virtue ethics can or seeks to determine whether an action is morally right is debated in the literature. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *supra* note 11, at 8 f. says that "It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong,' one always named a genus such as 'untruthful'" (sic). This paper seeks to develop thought on virtue in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, not to take a stance on this question. See for instance Gregory Trianosky, *What Is Virtue Ethics All About?* 27 *Am. Philos. Q.* 335–344 (1990); Julia Annas, *Applying Virtue to Ethics*, 32 *J. Appl. Philos.* 1–14 (2015); John Hacker-Wright, *Virtue Ethics Without Right Action: Anscombe, Foot, and Contemporary Virtue Ethics*, 44 *J. Value Inquiry* 209–224 (2010).

24 *Id.* at III.6–9.

25 Roger Crisp, *A Third Method of Ethics?* 90 *Philos. Phenomenol. Res.*, 257–273.

26 Cf. ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at III.2–3, especially 1112a16f and 1112b3f.

it. It rather happens when one chooses to accept as an object of the will the desire in question to act virtuously. Virtue ethics can be understood as based on a conception of freedom that involves making something the object of one's will. Harry Frankfurt in his *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* presents two orders of will relevant for the discussion:²⁷ The first-order will accounts for us wanting (to do) something in the immediate time; for instance, you are cold and having a tea is the object of your will. The second-order will decides whether we want *that object*, having a tea for instance, to be the object of our (first-order) will. Actual freedom lies in this second-order will: Even if you were deprived of your freedom to do certain things, you remain free to decide what it is you want. Human beings do not exercise their will and their freedom only when having certain desires and fulfilling them, but when they want and choose *to be moved* by something in particular. In order to act virtuously, it is not sufficient to hold a virtuous action as object of one's will since this can be obtained by imposition that forces you to act: For example, your government requires you to stay indoors, something you (reluctantly) accept.²⁸ But you only want to stay indoors because you would face hefty fines if you did not. In addition, we *need to want the way in which our will is directed*. Relevant for this is the virtue of temperance that can be construed as concerning whether our desires are reasonable.²⁹ In the moment in which we want our will to be directed towards staying indoors, we are exercising the freedom of our will and acting in an actually generous, prudent and temperate way.

Such a notion of freedom of the will is significantly richer than the mere absence of external constraints to our actions. Following Frankfurt, it is only thanks to the second order will that one can suffer or enjoy negative liberty: second order will is a precondition to negative liberty. This freedom cannot be limited by external constriction: the question of freedom is not about "translating his first-order desires into actions. That is the question of whether he is free to do as he pleases. Rather, it concerns his desires themselves."³⁰ The real problem of freedom is about *how the will is directed*. In the context of virtue ethics, an agent is *really free* when her will has as an object the virtuous action and she wants her will to be so directed. Accordingly, despite the limitations that the pandemic will force upon us, from collaborating with lockdowns measures to wearing masks, no freedom can be threatened when one acts virtuously and wants to act so.

CONCLUSIONS: ACTING VIRTUOUSLY DURING THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Finally, should we collaborate with the restrictions? What is the moral position that we should hold as individuals equally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? We have argued here that the individual (and public) response to the outbreak should be guided by considerations of virtue instead of utilitarianism and by freedom of the second-order will instead of the narrower notion of liberty from constraints. We should move

27 Harry G. Frankfurt, *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person*, 68 J. Philos. 5–20 (1971).

28 Aristotle illustrates this case with reference to courage: The person that holds firm in battle because of external compulsion does not, strictly speaking, possess the virtue of courage. Cf. ARISTOTLE and TERENCE IRWIN, *supra* note 11, at III.8.4, 1116a30ff.

29 *Id.* at III.12, 1119b17.

30 Harry G. Frankfurt, *supra* note 29, at 15.

towards a fuller picture of human actions and morality. Once we embrace the virtues of generosity, courage and prudence and want that our will is directed towards acting in a way that is *virtuous*, then even imposed restrictions, wearing masks when going outside and keeping social distancing do not look as immoral actions anymore (that diminish pleasure and inflict pain) or as a threat to our freedom, but rather as the virtuously right actions we should pursue. Our freedom is no more threatened by limitations, but augmented and dignified in the moment in which our second-order will *wants* to willingly respect the restrictions and the recommendations because this is what a *virtuous person does* in such circumstances; because the relevant virtues have become part of who we are (or perhaps have always been present, untrained, forgotten) and we merely need to give them the right space. Our generosity, courage and prudence prevent us from forgetting the most vulnerable, the old and the weak, because a virtuous person regards everyone. She is ready to give up a little in order to gain moral integrity while at the same time being involved in saving some lives.