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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Philosophy
How philosophy bears on COVID-19

Philosophy is rational enquiry that addresses fundamental matters of human life and that transcends science in some way. For example, biologists and chemists appeal to physical facts when explaining what transpires in the world, but philosophers (and specifically ontologists) consider whether there is only a physical realm and whether there is evidence of anything spiritual such as God. Cosmologists claim to know some facts about the universe, whereas philosophers (epistemologists) try to ascertain how it is they know and why astrologers do not know. Sociologists describe how people behave using value-free language, while philosophers (ethicists) prescribe how they morally ought to behave and distinguish between good and bad ways of living.

What follow are three examples of ways in which philosophers are particularly well qualified to address difficult questions pertaining to COVID-19. My aim is not to provide answers here, but rather to demonstrate that compelling answers are not obvious and would require sustained and careful philosophical enquiry.

How should we allocate scarce resources during a pandemic? Ethicists, and specifically philosophers of justice, argue about how to allocate benefits and burdens in ways that are fair. Such issues abound in the context of COVID-19. Consider, here, debates concerning how to balance the interests of the elderly against those of the young. Most who die from COVID-19 are older than 60, while Africa has a relatively large population of young people. How should trade-offs be made between them?

Specifically, if both an elderly person and a youthful person need a ventilator to survive, but resources are scarce such that only one of them can receive a ventilator, who should it be? Should one flip a coin in such cases, because all lives have an equal dignity? Or should we favour the young, because the old have already had lives to lead? Or should we favour the old, because they are entitled to greater respect in virtue of their personhood (wisdom, accomplishment) and because they have paid much more tax into the health-care system?

Beyond this dilemma involving just two persons, there are broader, generational conflicts. For instance, is saving the lives of thousands of elderly people worth impairing the livelihoods of a much greater number of youth through a lockdown? If you are tempted to say that life always trumps livelihood, does it follow that driving cars should be forbidden due to the tens of thousands of lives that are lost in accidents each year?

Must we obey all the government's rules about COVID-19? Ethicists, and specifically political and legal philosophers, argue about when and why we are obligated to obey the government. Sometimes its laws and policies appear unjust, and you, the reader, are invited to pick your favourite example pertaining to COVID-19. Are we obligated to obey a government's rules even when we reasonably disagree with them?

One might be tempted to say that we are obligated to obey only the just laws and policies, and not any of the unjust ones. However, imagine what would happen if people disobeyed the government any time they thought its rules are unjust. Think about what would happen to tax collection, for instance. Values such as the rule of law, order, and peace would be gravely threatened.

In contrast, then, one might suggest that one has a duty to obey all of a government's decisions, whether just or unjust. Or one might think, more specifically, that one has a duty to obey any law or policy that has been ratified by an elected majority. Maybe rebellion against dictatorships is justified, whereas it is not against democracies. However, imagine you are in a group of three people, where, after some debate at a park, two of them vote to take away your shoes and you vote to keep them. The decision was made democratically, but are you obligated to abide by it? Similarly, remember that slavery and Jim Crow laws in the USA were democratically adopted; white people simply outnumbered black people. Did slaves really have a moral obligation to obey their masters? What difference might there be between these cases and your favourite COVID-19 example above?

Whom should we believe about COVID-19? Epistemologists argue about when and why it is appropriate to believe claims about the nature of ourselves and the world. There have been a variety of sources offering competing perspectives on how the coronavirus is spread, how it has affected people's lives and health, and how best to stem the pandemic. The government says one thing in policy briefings, a majority of scientists might have formed a view, a minority of scientists invariably dissent from the majority, international NGOs have their view, religious leaders have theirs, citizens on YouTube who appear to have done a lot of research have theirs, and you of course have yours. When these various viewpoints are incompatible, how should you proceed?

You might be drawn to hold one of two extremes. On the one hand, you might think, 'It's my life, and so I'm going to believe whatever I want or what makes me feel good'. However, it's not just your life that is affected by how you live; the choices you make can radically influence the course of other people's lives, even end them.

On the other hand, you might think, 'I'm not qualified to form an opinion; I'll just leave it to others to judge'. However, you do have a life to live, and so the question becomes: which others should you believe when making choices, including, say, about whether to send your children back to school?

In between these extremes is the approach that we should form beliefs in the light of what the experts tell us. Who counts as an expert? Presumably someone who knows a lot about a topic. OK. But how can we tell who that is? You might be inclined to say that we can know someone is an expert because other experts say so. But how can you know that *those* people are experts? Because they say so, or because still other self-proclaimed experts say so? Presumably not, but then how is one to identify those with expertise?

To conclude, most readers will have real difficulty providing what they deem to be firm answers to these questions backed up by reasoning that others would find compelling. Philosophers are in the business of searching for such answers. No – we do not always find them. However, we do spend 45+ years of our lives trying to. Might we therefore count as experts, or at least deserve a hearing?