



Frankfurt School

Corona, Values and Moral Responsibility: Who owes what to whom?

WHERE WE STAND

- We have witnessed weeks of unprecedented restrictions in **freedom**.
- For now, measures of social distancing have successfully ‘**flattened the curve**’.
- At the same time, ...
 - the lock-down has very severe **economic** consequences,
 - **children** cannot go to school,
 - **domestic violence** is on the rise,
 - other **health problems** are not being treated,
 - etc. ...



WHAT WE OFTEN HEAR

- “ People are showing an admirable degree of **solidarity**: They accept very severe personal restrictions for the benefit of those most at risk.
- “ However, solidarity has its **limits**: We must be **grateful** for the solidarity shown, but must not overstrain people’s willingness to show such generosity and benevolence.

(e.g. see Deutscher Ethikrat, ‘Solidarität und Verantwortung in der Corona-Krise’, <https://www.ethikrat.org/fileadmin/Publikationen/Ad-hoc-Empfehlungen/deutsch/ad-hoc-empfehlung-corona-krise.pdf>.)



WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO DO TODAY



Let's shift perspective:

Our focus on **solidarity** is **morally misleading**: It provides the wrong moral analysis of the situation we currently face.



Let's turn tables:

It is not the risk group that owes **gratitude** to others for staying at home; rather, we **owe** it to those who are at risk to stay in.

(I will closely follow C. Bublitz, who develops this argument in his excellent paper: 'Es gibt keine Freiheit, Teil einer Infektionskette zu sein: Solidarität und Pflicht in der Pandemie', <https://www.praefaktisch.de/covid-19/es-gibt-keine-freiheit-teil-einer-infektionskette-zu-sein-solidaritaet-und-pflicht-in-der-pandemie/>)

THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



1. WHAT IS SOLIDARITY?

For our purposes, let us understand by 'solidarity' the willingness...

- to act in a way that is to the **benefit of others**, which is
- based on a sense of **shared community** and **interest in others' needs** and preferences, where
- this incurs **costs** to those showing solidarity, whilst
- this willingness is **not owed** to those benefitting from solidarity, but given voluntarily.



1. THE SOLIDARITY ANALYSIS

Let's apply this directly to the Corona crisis:

- Based on their sense of community and interest in the **risk group's needs** and preferences,
- many currently display the **voluntary willingness** to stay at home for the sake of those at risk,
- despite incurring **considerable costs** and accepting **significant restrictions** in personal, political and economic freedoms.



1. SOLIDARITY – OBSERVATIONS

Needless to say, solidarity is fantastic – still, note the following:

- Showing solidarity is a **voluntary** act: It goes beyond ‘the call of moral duty’ in that we do **not owe** solidarity to others, but give it voluntarily.
(In philosophy, we call morally good actions that go beyond our moral duties **supererogatory**.)
- As such, solidarity is not something that we can strictly **demand** of others; at most, it is something that we can **ask** for.
- This is also why those showing solidarity deserve our **gratitude** – just as was stated in our fictitious quotes.



1. SOLIDARITY – THE PROBLEM



Staying at home because of Corona is **not** a **voluntary**, supererogatory act for which those at risk have to be **grateful**.

It is something that we **owe** to others.

Here is why.

THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



2. LET'S START WITH A THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT

So, what do you think: Should you go the birthday party?



2. LET'S START WITH A THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT

NO

- By going to the party, you would obviously risk passing your heavy cold onto others – put differently, you would risk **harming** other party guests.
- However, we all have the **moral duty not to harm**: *Ceteris paribus*, it is impermissible to put others in harm's way.

Consequently, given your moral **duty** not to harm, you **ought** to stay at home.

2. THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT: OBSERVATIONS



- Note that your staying at home is **not** a benevolent, voluntary act of **solidarity** for which members of the birthday party have to be **grateful**.
- Rather, having established a moral duty of yours, we can legitimately **demand** of you that you stay in.

2. MOVING ON



Let's apply exactly the same kind of argument to the Corona crisis.

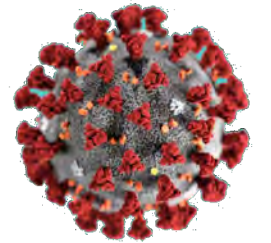
THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



2.1 THE SIMPLE ARGUMENT

- (P1) By not staying at home, those who are **infected** with the corona virus seriously **risk causing great harm** to others.
- (P2) Everybody has the **moral duty** to abstain from actions that carry a serious risk of causing great harm to others.
- (C) Hence, those who are infected with the corona virus have the moral duty to **stay at home**.



2.1 TURNING TABLES: SIMPLE

- Note that in contrast to the solidarity analysis, the simple argument establishes a **moral duty** for the infected to stay at home.
- Accordingly, staying at home is **not** a benevolent, **voluntary** action that the infected can but need not perform – rather, it is what they are required to do.



But if so, it is **not** the risk group who **owes gratitude** to those staying at home.

Rather, it is the **infected** who **owe** it to the risk group to stay in – it is their duty not to put others in harm's way.

2.1 THE SIMPLE ARGUMENT – THE PROBLEM

So far, so good. But here is an obvious problem:

- This argument works well with respect to the **infected**: It justifies why those who carry the virus and thus pose a risk to others have the duty to stay at home.
- However, **most of us** are not infected!
- So, whilst the simple argument explains why 500,000 people (say) ought to stay at home, it does **not explain** why another 82.5 million who pose no risk should do so.

Hence, we clearly need to do **more work**. How?



2.1 WHAT NEXT?

- On the one hand, we could pursue a two-pronged strategy by...
 - adopting the **simple** argument for the **infected**, while
 - developing a **different argument** to explain why the **non-infected** should also stay at home.
- On the other hand, we could seek to **augment** the **simple argument** such that it can be applied to **both** the infected and the non-infected.

I will seek to pursue the **latter** avenue.



THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. Another role for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



2.2 IN AN IDEAL WORLD...

... all of the following would hold:

- Those who have caught the virus **know** that they are infectious from the moment of contracting the virus.
- Those who are infectious **know** that they have the duty not to harm others, and **act accordingly** by staying at home.
- Infection events can be quickly identified and **tracked**, such that infection chains can be **broken** before becoming out of control.

In this ideal world, the **non-infected** would have no duty to stay in.



2.2 PANDEMIC REALITY

However, none of these conditions hold in our pandemic reality:

- The infected do **not know** sufficiently early that they are infectious and can, therefore, not act on the basis of their moral duty not to harm others.
- Infection events **cannot be tracked** sufficiently quickly to break infection chains.

How, then, does the **inability** of the infected to observe the duty not to endanger others **impact** on the moral duty of the **non-infected** to stay at home?



2.2 DO MORAL DUTIES CHANGE?

- On the one hand, we could submit that due to ‘Corona **uncertainty**’, **everyone** should simply regard herself as infectious. But I don’t want to pursue that avenue here.
- On the other hand, we could say that the inability or unwillingness of *others* to fulfil their moral duties **does not impact** on the duties *we* have.

But this isn’t very plausible either – others’ actions do affect the duties we have.

How, then, does infected people’s **inability** to observe the duty not to endanger others **impact** on the moral duty of the non-infected to stay at home?



2.2 THE INTERLOCKED DUTY ARGUMENT

- Since the infected **cannot observe** their duty not to endanger others, they cannot withdraw from society sufficiently quickly to stop the virus from spreading.
- Consequently, by going out the non-infected seriously risk **becoming infected** themselves and, as a consequence, turning into a danger to others.
 - We have the **moral duty** not to engage in activities that seriously risk endangering others.
 - Hence, the **non-infected** have the moral duty to stay home.



2.2 MORAL DUTIES – OBSERVATIONS

- Note that this argument for the non-infected draws on the **same consideration** – endangering others – as the simple argument for the infected.
- Yet, the non-infected have the moral duty to stay at home **only** because the **infected** cannot fulfil **their** moral duty not to endanger others.
- Note also that this moral duty has **nothing** to do with any **uncertainty** about being or not being infected. Nor does it apply only to those who will **in fact** become infected.

Rather, it applies to anyone, no matter whether or not they will in fact contract the virus.



2.2 WHERE DO WE STAND?



- Hence, it is **not solidarity** that justifies why we should stay at home.
- Rather, both the infected and the non-infected have the moral **duty** to do so!

2.2 WHERE DO WE STAND?

But if so, is there any role for solidarity to play? And what would it amount to?



THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



3. THE ROLE FOR SOLIDARITY



Of course, there is still loads of space left for solidarity!

- Think of solidarity amongst **neighbours!**
- Think of solidarity amongst **states!**



3. THE ROLE FOR SOLIDARITY

Could there even be solidarity amongst businesses? Think about it:

- Some businesses are **not hit** that hard – or can even profit from the crisis! – whereas others have had to shut down altogether.
- Some businesses can **open now** whilst others have to remain closed.
- Some businesses can **make up** some of the losses, whereas others cannot, etc.
- Moreover, it appears to be no more than **luck** whether businesses fall into the first or the second category!

So, should there be solidarity amongst businesses?



3. THE ROLE FOR SOLIDARITY

Could there even be solidarity amongst businesses? Think about it:

- Some businesses are **not hit** that hard – or can even profit from the crisis! – whereas others have had to shut down altogether.
- Some businesses can **open now** whilst others have to remain closed.
- Some businesses can **make up** some of the losses, whereas others cannot, etc.
- Moreover, it appears to be no more than **luck** whether businesses fall into the first or the second category!

Maybe – but again, it might be **justice**, not solidarity, that is at stake here!



THE PLAN

1. What is solidarity?
2. Why the focus on solidarity is misleading
 - 2.1 The simple argument: The duty not to harm
 - 2.2 Making it more complex: Pandemic reality
3. A place for solidarity?
4. Conclusion



3. CONCLUSION

- **Nothing** that I have said here detracts from or **downplays** the value of solidarity!
- Still, we need to look far **beyond solidarity** in order to gain a proper moral understanding of the current situation and to find out **who owes what to whom**.



**THANKS
FOR YOUR
ATTENTION**



Frankfurt School of Finance and Management gGmbH

Adickesallee 32-34

60322 Frankfurt am Main

Christine Tiefensee

Associate Professor of Philosophy

Phone: +49 69 154008-0

E-Mail: c.tiefensee@fs.de

www.frankfurt-school.de

Pictures: www.freepik.com: (1) master1305, (2) freepik, (3) Timo Lenzen/ DER

SPIEGEL, (4) starline, (5) pressfoto



[@frankfurtschool](https://twitter.com/frankfurtschool)



facebook.com/FrankfurtSchool



youtube.com/FrankfurtSchoolLive



linkedin.com/company/frankfurtschool



instagram.com/frankfurtschool

