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.

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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?
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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.
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2. LET’S START WITH A THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT

So, what do you think: Should you go the birthday party?
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.
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2.1 THE SIMPLE ARGUMENT

(P1) By not staying at home, those who are infected with the coronavirus 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 coronavirus 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.
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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?
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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

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- Some businesses are **not hit** that hard – or can even profit from the crisis! – whereas others have had to shut down altogether.
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- 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!
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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
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