

Ethics as Means to Win the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

One of the main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines is the observance of health and safety protocols. Based on direct observation, many people in public places fail to observe these protocols and thus making themselves and others vulnerable to the virus. Through textual analysis and hermeneutics, this study provides elucidations using the ethical principles, theories, and frameworks of select philosophers like Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and Jean Stuart Mill to educate, remind, qualify or justify why the strict observance of these protocols are necessary and vital to protection and promotion of the welfare of people making them safe and healthy during the pandemic. The findings reveal that not following these protocols prevents people from attaining the highest good which is happiness. Likewise, violating the protocols is contrary to duty or the absolute command of reason. Moreover, failure to observe the protocols causes harm to oneself and others than good. The study concludes that ethics provides propelling reasons for people to follow the health and safety protocols during the pandemic. This is how ethics helps win the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Ethics, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Jean Stuart Mill

Introduction

Since the beginning of the outbreak of the COVID- 19 pandemic, all states across the globe, from the national governments down to local governments, have crafted, adopted, and implemented rules, guidelines, and protocols to slow down if not totally prevent the virus from spreading and from ensuring safety and well-being of the entire populace. It cannot be denied that following or observing these safety and health protocols are the best ways to combat the pandemic (Department of Health, n.d.).

However, based on observation in the context of the Philippines, despite the massive campaign on the strict observance of these rules, guidelines, and protocols, a lot of people do not wear masks, face shields and observe social or physical distancing in public places (REUTERS, n.d). This only shows that creating good if not excellent rules, policies and guidelines, and protocols is one thing, and following or observing these protocols is also another thing. Hence, safety and health protocols and guideless are only good when people faithfully and strictly follow and observe them; otherwise, they are good as nothing. Therefore, at the end of the day, what really counts is the individual's choice and decision to follow and observe these protocols and guidelines.

It is important to note that the individual's informed choice and decision to act is a matter of ethics because all decisions, choices, and actions of a human being that are deliberate, that is, with intention, purpose, goal, conscious, and willfully done, are considered human acts and these do not only entail responsibility and liability but they could either be good or evil in intention, in itself and in consequence/s. Whatever is concerned with the morality or the goodness or evil of human action is a concern of ethics (Margolis, 1969). To choose or to decide to act by following or observing health and safety protocols during the pandemic is indeed a matter of ethics because these actions are not only deliberate, conscious, willful, and have responsibilities and liabilities, but they can either be good or evil. For this reason, this paper aims to present how ethics as the study of the morality of human actions partially ethical theories become the solid basis or foundation or principle on how people should act in times of pandemics by willfully favoring the observance of health and safety rules, guidelines and protocols as a course of action to overcome the pandemic. People need a solid foundation and principle of good action as their intrinsic motivation to obey, follow and implement the said protocols, and these principles or foundations are found in ethics itself.

Methodology

This study primarily utilizes the qualitative research design, a specific case study in which not following the health and safety protocol during the pandemic is considered unethical or is contrary to being ethical. Second, it employs textual analysis and hermeneutics. The former pertains to the method of data analysis that examines either the content or meaning of the text (Given, 2008). The text used is the literature or sources of select ethical theories. The latter means interpretation both in philosophy and in the field of qualitative research (Renning, n.d.). The writer or author interprets and discusses the select ethical theories and explain how these theories qualify and justify why not following the health and safety protocol is unethical or why the contrary is ethical, which in turn can become the principal or basis or intrinsic motivation of people to follow the health and safety protocols and guidelines to win or overcome pandemics particularly the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the following ethical theories are employed: Aristotelian ethics, Kantian ethics, and the ethics of John Stuart Mill. These ethical theories are selected based on the personal preference or choice of the author. Also, these three philosophers represent different traditions in ethics which analyze the case from different perspectives providing readers broader justification or qualification why it is unethical not to follow the health and safety protocols during the pandemic.

This study does not include any other theory and methods not mentioned in the methodology. Also, this study does not make use of any animal and human being as subjects.

Result and Discussion

Select Ethical Theories

Aristotelian Ethics

Ethics, according to Aristotle, is living a good life or a happy life or prosperous and flourishing life. This kind of life is achieved through virtue of the golden mean or by observing moderation at all times, that is, by avoiding the extremes-defects and excess. In other words, it is doing what is right, not too much, not also lacking but just to the right extent, meaning doing things with the right intention and the right way. Virtues are both intellectual and moral. The former is achieved through right thinking, right reasoning, the right education, and the right instruction, and the latter through right action constantly done or in the form of habituation or habit. Hence ethics is not only something theoretical but practically because to be virtuous or to be ethical/moral means not only to think right but to do things right, that is, putting good intention into action (Bykova, 2016).

Aristotle also spoke of the other elements of happiness aside from virtue which are having wealth, health, and true friendship (Roberts, n.d.). For Aristotle, true wealth is the possession of ample stocks of useful things (i.e., use values) to maintain the needs of the household and the *polis* (Youngkins, n.d.). By health, he means the adequate function of both soul and body; by soul, he refers to the principle of life or spiritual part of human/rational beings, and by the body, he refers to the organic or material component of the human being or animal or plant. Anything that diminishes life and the inadequacy of organic function is considered unhealthy (Preus, 1986). Lastly, when he speaks of true friendship, he refers to people who "must be mutually recognized as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other"(Kaliarnta, 2016).

Kantian Ethics

The Ethics of the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant centers on the question of what one ought to do? The principle of what one ought to do is not based on God, on human relations and institutions but reason. He calls this principle "goodwill" or the categorical imperative. Its best-known version is 'Act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law.' So, any principle or maxim of action that cannot be universalized must be rejected. The categorical imperative has other versions. Another version which is known as the Formula of the End Itself which requires that one treats humanity in your person or to treat human beings always as ends and not as means. The remaining version is where everyone becomes a legislator and bound by law that what is legislated is always about respect for others (O'Neill, 1993).

Ethics of John Stuart Mill

Morality for Stuart Mill has something to do with well-being or happiness; by happiness, he means pleasure. Hence actions that promote happiness or pleasure are right or good, and the contrary is evil. It is important to note that when Mill speaks of pleasure, he speaks of both bodily and mental pleasure but empathizes the superiority or greater value of mental or intellectual pleasure, which distinguishes human beings from a brute or a swine. If confronted to choose between mental and bodily pleasures, it is proper for a man to value and pursue mental or intellectual pleasures over bodily pleasures. Here, Mill recognizes the value of pleasure not merely on quantity but of quality, and it is the reason that enables the individual to decipher one from the other. Also, he is not concerned with merely one's pleasure or happiness. Still, the happiness of the greatest number or that promotes the happiness or the good of the whole including oneself, that is, to act or choose or decide for that which is truly good for all men (Mill, 1863).

Mill also introduced the harm principle in his work *On Liberty* which states that the only time and purpose that power or force can be used upon an individual or member of society is to prevent that individual from harming others. This means that the state cannot use force on any individual for so long as an individual does not cause harm to others (Ripstein, 2006).

How Ethics Becomes a Way to Overcome the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Aristotle, ethical virtue or being good is an intermediate condition in between excess and deficiencies, which he considers vices or evils (Kraut, 2001). Violating health protocols such as not wearing masks and face shields and not properly wearing them as well as not observing physical or social distancing are themselves deficiencies because they do not meet or they fall short of the fundamental requirement of the law or protocol which is considered correct and proper. For this reason, not observing the health protocol is a vice and therefore unethical.

Besides, if the highest good is to live a happy life or a prosperous life or flourishing life (Gurtler, 2003), then not following safety and health protocols during the academic does not give one a good and happy life but the contrary since it will make one and others vulnerable to the virus that threatens and may take away life and thus prevents the chance to have a happy and prosperous life if one has not yet achieved it or will curtail the happy and prosperous life people abruptly have.

Moreover, one element of happiness is to have wealth (Elliot, n.d.). Not following the health and safety protocols during the pandemic will eventually lead to the loss of wealth and, therefore, of happiness if more and more people will be afflicted by the virus. The cost of hospitalization due to COVID- 19 is quite high or expensive, and the economic loss of jobs and business opportunities due to lockdowns and quarantines are damaging to the people's wealth (Ulep, Paterno, Casas and Walker, n.d). Therefore, to avoid the added loss of wealth during the pandemic, it is best or proper to observe the safety and health protocols.

It is evident that health which is also an element of happiness; is negatively impacted if people will not follow or strictly and faithfully observe the safety and health protocols during the pandemic because it does not only diminish life but may also cause the termination of life and the inadequate organic function of the human body due to infection of the virus and its complications.

Another element of happiness, according to Aristotle, is true friendship. It requires mutual loving or reciprocal love; that is, both friends must desire or wish and do well for each other's sake (Souza, 1981). Not following the health and safety protocols during the pandemic violates Aristotle's concept of true friendship in the sense that exposing ones' friends, relatives, family members, and the people at large to the virus is not treating them well or wishing or doing them well or giving them love.

Immanuel Kant emphasized that ethics is all about goodwill or duty that is to act according to the absolute command of reason, also known as the categorical imperative, which can be expressed first as acting on a maxim that can be universalized or that which can be applied to all (O'Neill, 1993). Violating health protocols is an act that cannot be universalized primarily because it transgresses a rule or guidelines that is meant to protect others from the affliction of the virus or the pandemic. In other words, it is not favorable or beneficial to other people. Hence, it not applicable or cannot be applied to all, or it is something that others obviously would not accept and allow. Therefore, it is something that ought not to be done and therefore contrary to duty and goodwill.

Second, the categorical imperative also advocates treating human beings as ends and never as means. This means that every individual must not use people or human beings or take advantage of them but must see to it that everyone's actions and decisions will not affect people negatively or the goal and effect of every action and choice should always be the good of the person and not the contrary (Linder and Bentzen, 2018). Not following the safety and health protocols is not treating other human beings always also as ends because it will not be for the good of others. It will expose others to the virus, which will be of their detriment.

The third formulation of the categorical imperative is "So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims." This is also known as the formula of autonomy. This means that each human being has the authority inherent in his or her will to mold the world in accord with the dictates of reason that is every time one acts, one considers that the maxim of action is deserving of our status as molders of the world (Fieser, 2017). Not following the health and safety protocol during the pandemic certainly violates the formula of autonomy because instead of acting or choosing to mold the world into a better place for everyone to live well, one acts or chooses by molding a world that is hazardous for everyone to live by giving space or opportunity for the virus to spread and afflict people. It is acting contrary to reason and therefore contrary to duty.

The fourth formula of the categorical imperative is also known as the formula of the Kingdom of Ends. It says: "So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001)." It is obvious that not following the safety and health protocol does not only violate the law but violates the ultimate end of the law and law-making which is to promote and protect the welfare and the good of the people more than anything else.

John Stuart Mill emphasizes that happiness is tantamount to the good or well-being. When he speaks of good or well-being, he is referring to that which is pleasurable or the absence of pain. By pleasure, he means both bodily and intellectual pleasure. However, he considers intellectual pleasures to be superior to bodily pleasure. Hence when given the option to pursue bodily pleasure against intellectual pleasure, Mill would choose intellectual pleasure for this is what is proper to man or the human being. Also, it is important to highlight that Mill is not just talking about personal or individual happiness as the goal of human life and human action but rather the happiness of the greatest number or the happiness of every man. This means that when one acts or chooses, one must not only consider one's happiness but the happiness of all. The happiness of all men, or what he calls the greatest number, is the principle and yardstick of morality (Nahra, 2014).

Not following the health and safety protocols during the pandemic violates the principle of the happiness of the greatest number because it does not consider the welfare or good of other people. Apparently, it is for one's convenience, but realistically it is not because it does not only put the majority in peril of the virus but also oneself. It makes everyone more vulnerable to pain than helping them attain pleasure. Therefore, it does not truly make anyone happy.

Moreover, Stuart Mill speaks of the Harm Principle, which says that the only goal or reason for which power can be imposed over a member of the community or society against his will is to prevent that member from harming others (Hotlug, 2002). Not following the health and safety protocols during the pandemic, which exposes people to the harm of the virus, is a violation of the harm principle. Thus, in line with the principle, the state may use force against violators to prevent them from harming others.

Concerning the preceding discussion, St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the relationship of the intellect and will. The will is the appetitive power of the rational soul that chooses or pursues the good. It is the intellect that presents the good to the will for the will to choose or pursue. In other words, without the intellect, the will cannot freely choose or pursue the good as an end (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Thus, moral knowledge in general and specific knowledge of what is right and wrong in specific cases or circumstances are necessary for human beings to be able to choose what is right and proper in a given context like the COVID 19 pandemic. This is where knowledge of ethical theories is necessary for people to know the inherent and compelling value, for instance, of following health and safety protocols that will help communities fight and overcome the pandemic.

Conclusion

Ethics provides theories that serve as frameworks, principles, or foundations of choice and action of people to follow or obey the health and safety protocols that states and health organizations around the world consider as the best means to fight and overcome the pandemic. Educating and reminding the people of these ethical theories will deepen and expand their knowledge and awareness of what is ethical and non-ethical, what ought to be done, and what not ought to be done during a pandemic. These theories also elaborate, qualify and justify why it is proper, it is best and most beneficial to follow the health and safety protocols instead of ignoring them. This is how ethics helps win pandemics.

Recommendation

The study recommends the use of other theories of ethics to educate, remind, elaborate, justify and qualify why it is necessary, vital, and ethical to follow health and safety during the pandemic. It is also interesting to delve into the lived experiences of people why they do not follow or why it is difficult for them to follow the health and safety protocols during the pandemic.

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