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Authors	Humphreys, Joe;Dineen, Katy
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Are we all Kantians now? The Covid-19 effect on moral philosophy


Joe Humphreys
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The coronavirus pandemic has been a shock not just to the health system. It has given a jump-start to moral consciences. Things we tolerated as a society – such as low pay for essential workers and income barriers to hospital treatment – suddenly seem abominable.

Structural unfairness has become harder to ignore. Ethical exceptionalism – the idea that some people can operate by a different moral code – gets short shrift at a time of intimate interdependence.

It's as if we're all Kantians now, believing in one rule for everyone.

And not before time, says Katy Dineen, an assistant lecturer in philosophy at UCC, who regards the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant as a suitable guide in our current predicament. A key aspect of his ethical framework is to avoid privileging oneself in moral deliberations. He forces us to ask what values we would rationally choose if we could stand back from our own circumstances and judge impartially.

Dineen, who also works at the Mizen Group, a regulatory technology company specialising in compliance, says the Covid-19 crisis is not only exposing social justice tensions; it is modelling a fairer society too.

> This virus is making it harder for us to shield our eyes from the conditions some workers are being asked to tolerate

For the Mizen Group, she hopes to play a practical role in the recovery period by developing analytical tools for building trust in necessary institutions such as banks. Dineen explains further as this week's Unthinkable guest.

How is the virus uncovering social justice tensions?

Katy Dineen: "Kant has this great phrase, 'the foul stain of our species', to describe the human capacity for deception. We often lie, to others, and ourselves, painting our self-serving actions as motivated by duty and virtue. At the moment, corona is showing us that the inequalities we have tolerated in society cannot be hidden behind virtue.

"Let me give an example: the so-called gig economy. We often refer to gig workers as contingent because their contracts are short-term, with little stability and few employment rights. These contingent contracts can be far from attractive, yet we often use the word 'flexible' to signal their virtue.

"Covid-19 is showing us just how necessary these contingent workers are, and how shoddily they have been treated. They are often the people who clean hospitals, deliver packages, and keep supermarket shelves stocked. Many of these workers have no choice but to be out and about; isolation may be a marker of privilege.

"This virus is making it harder for us to shield our eyes from the conditions some of these workers are being asked to tolerate."

Does the crisis suggest we are at heart Kantians, given the only legitimate political philosophy at present is an egalitarian one?

"I am a Kantian; in some circles this is tantamount to admitting a dirty secret. But I think Kantians – for example John Rawls – have a lot to offer now.

"Rawls used something called 'the veil of ignorance' to flesh out his concept of justice. The idea behind it is, if, when asked to make a decision that concerns us all, we are deprived of knowledge about ourselves – sex, race, age, income, etc – we are likely to make fair decisions. We won't know our own special interests, and so we won't know enough to be able to prioritise them.

"Rawls believed that deprived of the knowledge of our special interests, societal status and abilities, we would choose to afford each person as much freedom as is compatible with the freedom of others and we would allocate resources to benefit the least advantaged amongst us.

"This is egalitarianism based on reasonableness, and, in my opinion, it has never been more pertinent. Covid-19 effects prime ministers and paupers and doesn't care one whit for our special interests. The precariousness of some makes us all vulnerable.

"If workers are more at risk because they are not isolating or they are not provided with adequate PPE [personal protective equipment], then they are more likely to pass on the virus. Scarcity of resources compounds matters. That worker need not have caught the virus, but they are now using a precious ICU bed. That's one less bed available for everyone else."

Many economists are predicting a rise in inequality during the recovery period. How can we stop this from happening?

"It is likely that people already on the edge will topple into poverty. Given their 'contingency', gig workers will be the easiest employees to lay off.

"Emily Maitlis's critique of the language around 'we are all in this together' is well made. But I think we might also add words like 'hero' when used for these necessary workers. Potentially, this is another instance of the language of virtue hiding a truth of injustice. Rather than lauding their heroism, I would prefer to see a stimulus package taking into account that these 'self-employed' workers may suffer the brunt of the coming economic crisis.

"Long-term decisions also have to be made. It would be reasonable to base these decisions around the elimination of this sort of precariousness. One idea here would be to follow New Zealand and focus on wellbeing rather than output to evaluate policies."

Businesses and especially banks will be relied upon to drive on the economic recovery. How do we know if we can trust the banks again?

"We don't trust banks – surveys repeatedly tell us this. Yet we need them. Affordable credit and a means of safeguarding assets allow individuals to grow businesses and put roofs over heads – now more than ever.

"Here I follow Onora O'Neill – another Kantian, by the way. We will never know for sure whether banks are trustworthy, we will have to make a judgment call. These days nearly all banks will have some policy telling consumers about their values. Here too we have to be wary of the 'foul stain', or the capacity for deceit in these matters. What we need is specific, relevant information.

"I am not talking about reams of terms and conditions that nobody ever reads. I am talking about information on whether the values stated in their policies actually play out authentically within the bank. And I think you will get good answers to this question if you ask their employees – anonymously.

"I am currently working with the Mizen Group, which creates tools to do just this. My role is to advise on whether the diagnostic tracks O'Neill's concept of trustworthiness, commenting on issues of social justice and the role of banks within their communities.

"Philosophy is often thought of as an armchair sport; but I am getting to apply philosophy in a way that I think is socially impactful. Given the mess the coronavirus will likely leave behind, I feel, now more than ever, the need to make my work practically useful."

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Viral dilemma? Ask a philosopher

What are your thoughts about the Covid-19 crisis? Is our freedom threatened? Should we rethink the welfare system? Is lockdown an opportunity to slow down?

The Centre for Ethics in Public Life at UCD invites questions and reflections about all philosophical aspects of the pandemic.

It is inviting people to send one question, together with 50-100 words explaining why it's important, to cepl@ucd.it; all questions will be displayed on the centre's website and a philosopher will respond weekly to chosen queries by a video to be published online. See: https://www.ucd.ie/cepl/publicoutreach/covid-19pandemic/

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