

SPECIAL PRINT  
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Medicine and Ethics in Times of Corona

edited by

Martin Woesler and Hans-Martin Sass

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**Baydar, Prof. Dr. Tuba Erkoç** is Assistant Professor with Ibn Haldun University. She was born in Bitlis, graduated from Uludag University Faculty of Theology with a minor in Social Sciences in 2009. She completed her master's degree at the Faculty of Theology at Istanbul University in 2011 with her thesis, "Command and Prohibition in Abū Ishāq Al-Shīrāzī's Legal Thought". In 2011, her doctorate studies started at Marmara University in the field of Islamic Law and she continued to work as research assistant at the same department. In 2017, she gained the title of doctor with the thesis of "Euthanasia and Withholding Treatment: an Islamic Legal Analysis". Tuba Erkoç Baydar was born in a scholarly family and began her studies at an early age under her family. Her madrasah education continued at Bursa and at Istanbul. Meanwhile, she completed ISAM's AYP program. She has been at France, Syria and Jordan for educational purposes and in 2014, she stayed for a year at United States at Georgetown University Kennedy Institute of Ethics for conducting research and participating several courses: ISLAM'S APPROACH TO INFECTIOUS DISEASES THROUGH THE EYES OF A NINTH CENTURY MUSLIM SCHOLAR.

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**Byk, Christian**, is Judge at the Court of Appeal in Paris, Secretary General of the International Association of Law, Ethics and Science and Chairman of the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee of UNESCO (2017-2019). christian.byk@gmail.com: BEYOND PANDEMICS: THE REORANIZATION OF POWERS AND THE NEW FACE OF SOCIETY

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**Dahlke, Dr. med. Eva** physician in training to specialize in occupational medicine with a profound knowledge of emergency medicine and global assistance medicine. Postgraduate studies in medical ethics focusing on the interface between occupational medicine and ethics, primarily digital communication transformation concerning vulnerable groups: HOME OFFICE IN THE PANDEMIC: CURSE OR BLESSING?

**DiEuliis, Dr. Diane** is a Senior Research fellow at National Defense University. Her research areas focus on emerging biological technologies, biodefense, and preparedness for biothreats. Specific topic areas under this broad research portfolio include dual use life sciences research, synthetic biology, the US bioeconomy, disaster recovery, and behavioral, cognitive, and social science as it relates to important aspects of deterrence and preparedness. Dr. DiEuliis currently lectures in a variety of foundational professional military education courses across all the services: OF NEMESIS AND NARCISSUS: LESSONS COVID MAY PROVIDE FOR ENTERPRISES – AND ETHICS – OF GLOBAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND BIOSECURITY.

**Donev, Prof. Dr. Dejan.** Born in Skopje, North Macedonia, in 1976. He completed his studies in philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in 1999. He received master degree from the same University in 2005, and doctoral degree in June 2008, both in philosophy. The key research interests of prof. Donev are in Ethics, History of Ethics, especially Bioethics, Ecological Ethics and Animal Ethics. During his professional career he has published numerous scientific papers, participated in a number of referent international scientific conferences and congresses, as well as in national and regional scientific research projects. Prof. Donev is working on the Department of Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy, University “Sts. Cyril and Methodius”, in Skopje, N. Macedonia and currently is the

Head of the Center for integrative bioethics at the same faculty. E-mail contact: donevdejan@fzf.ukim.edu.mk: BETWEEN EGO(CENTR)ISM AND COOPERATION: WOULD PEOPLE BECOME MORALY DISENGAGED OR MORE ALTRUISTIC AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

**Eberle, Dr. theol. Martin**, studied Protestant Theology in Heidelberg, Leipzig, Berlin, Bielefeld and Madurai (India). With an interdisciplinary work on the topic “Understanding Economic Ethics. Max Weber’s Studies on Ancient Judaism from a theological-ethical perspective” he received his doctorate from the Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal/Bethel (Germany). He is the pastor of the German Lutheran Church Washington, D.C.: HOW CAN GOD LET THIS HAPPEN? A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE PANDEMIC.

**Elisovna, Prof. Dr. Guryleva Marina** doctor of medical Sciences, Professor of the Department of biomedical ethics, biomedical law with a course in the history of medicine of the Kazan state medical University. Chairman of the Local Ethics Committee for clinical research of Kazan state medical University, member of the International society of clinical bioethics. Research interests: bioethics, ethics and standards of clinical research, history of medicine, public health. E-mail: meg4478@mail.ru: BIOETHICS AND PANDEMICS IN THE MODERN WORLD: COVID-19.

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**Fritzhand, Prof. Dr. Ana**. Born in Skopje, North Macedonia, in 1978. She completed her studies in psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in 2001. She received master degree from the same University in 2007, and doctoral degree in May 2010, both in psychology. The key research interests of prof. Fritzhand are in Developmental psychology, Moral psychology, and the Psychology of peace and conflict. During her professional career she has published numerous scientific papers, participated in a number of referent international scientific conferences and congresses, as well as in national and regional scientific research projects. Prof. Fritzhand is currently the head of the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje and Vice President of the Chamber of Psychologists of North Macedonia. E-mail contact: anaf@fzf.ukim.edu.mk: BETWEEN EGO(CENTR)ISM AND COOPERATION: WOULD PEOPLE BECOME MORALY DISENGAGED OR MORE ALTRUISTIC AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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erny.gillen@moralfactory.com: DO WE STILL NEED ETHICS?

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CONTROVERSY IN JAPAN'S TESTING POLICY AGAINST THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS DISEASE AND THE DIFFICULTIES SURROUNDING THE FACT.

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# **Between Ego(centr)ism and Cooperation:**

## **Would People become Morally Disengaged or More Altruistic after the COVID-19 pandemic?**

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### **Abstract**

The world is facing great health challenge since COVID-19 pandemic was declared. However, it is not only immense health issue, but also psychological, bioethical, economical, and political one. There are many unanswered questions. Among them is how this pandemic will affect people’s mental health and their moral behavior? In this paper, the authors are focusing on the dilemma whether people will become more morally disengaged, or more altruistic after the pandemic is over. Hence, the knowledge from ethics and psychology is integrated, having in mind that people have potential for being both good and bad in their actions towards others.

### **Key words**

egocentrism, egoism, cooperation, moral disengagement, altruism, bioethics

### **1. Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic is the most popular daily issue since the day it was declared by WHO. It raises unique ethical dilemmas because it is not only immense health issue, but also psychological, bioethical, economical, and political one. Thus, it makes demands on society from all domains of life, worldwide. According to Regilme Jr. (2020), although only twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have passed, the world already faced three grand crises. The first one is related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA. The second happened in 2007-2008 and was related to the global financial crisis that was considered the worst economic crisis since 1930s. Finally, the third one is still happening and is called “COVID-19” pandemic. This newest crisis has also accelerated the emergence of an epistemic crisis that became obvious in delegitimation and pervasive doubt of/in professional expertise, scientific knowledge as well as the reliability and legitimacy of established institutions, including public health institutions.

Following this, there are many open questions regarding various aspects of social and personal functioning that are important, especially from the bioethical standpoint. Concepts like “social distancing”, “the new reality/normality”, “isolation”, “lockdown” etc., are already common in the media. As Khoo and Lantos (2020:1) point out, everybody are facing restriction on freedom of movement and must deal with it the best they can. But, how the application of these concepts relates to everyday quality of peoples’ life? It is almost sure that this pandemic will affect and is already affecting the mental health of individuals. However, there is still no final answer on how it will affect people’s mental health and their moral behavior on short and long-term basis? Finally, although everybody speak of “new normality” and that “the life will never be the same”, what it is really going to look like when this is all over?

### **2. Moral Disengagement vs. Altruism**

There is an increasing interest among psychologists, both researchers and practitioners, about the concept of moral disengagement. Albert Bandura (2016), the author of this concept, points out that in order to understand morality and moral behavior as a whole, it is necessary to be able to explain not only what motivates people to behave morally, but also why in certain circumstances people behave passively, inhumanly and/or violently, but still have a positive

opinion of themselves. Theories of morality are usually directed towards the inhibitory aspect of moral agency, which is manifested in one's ability to refrain from inhumane behavior. However, there is also a proactive form of moral agency. It is recognized in compassion for the suffering of others or in efforts to improve their well-being, often to one's own detriment.

In the past, moral development theories have focused on the adoption of moral standards and the development of moral reasoning as prerequisites for moral behavior. However, it is quite clear today that these concepts are not the most important factors leading to individual's moral behavior. Moral disengagement is one of the arguments that underpin this view. This is because selective activation and disengagement from self-sanctioning, enables different actions by individuals with the same moral standards. This is observed in certain situations where moral disengagement is manifested by individuals who otherwise show compassion in other areas of their lives. Moral disengagement is closely linked to the self-regulation mechanisms that need to be activated first. Therefore, some individuals can be both cruel and humane towards different people at the same time, depending on whom they include and exclude from their category of humanity (Bandura, 2016).

According to Khoo and Lantos (2020:2), there are evidence of increased domestic violence and alcohol abuse during the quarantine period, where children are mostly vulnerable due to their lack of power. Travel restrictions and the lockdowns of schools, universities and work places are main factors for emerging feelings of loneliness, boredom, confusion, anger, frustration, as well as continuous feeling of being inadequately informed. Some or all of these are reflected in peoples' actions and can result in various forms of unadapt or dysfunctional reasoning and behavior. However, having in mind the global focus on the at-risk populations, the fear for the safety of others, i.e. *altruistic fear* (Warr & Ellison, 2000; as cited in Sloan et al., 2020:3), has also become apparent. This type of fear is perceived in those individuals who fear for their families, friends and members of the close community of getting the virus, instead of feeling frightened exclusively for their own health.

As Jeronimus (2020) points out, COVID-19 pandemic already entered every aspect of peoples' lives and accelerated societal transformations. Although this pandemic affects individuals to a different level, depending on various factors (ex. age, gender, socioeconomic status, culture, personality, resilience etc.), it is more than obvious that at least secondary stress is present among majority of people. There is also change in values, politics and resources in the countries, especially those mostly affected by the virus. Furthermore, the number of lockdowns and prolonged social isolation is closely linked to financial and mental health issues. It also influences the way people organize their social networks, which can lead to the need of readjustment at the individual and social level as well. In this sense, when analyzing different cohorts it becomes obvious that youth and emerging adults are facing the challenge of maturing faster than their peers from previous generations. As for the others, it is plausible to experience increased level of introversion, uncertainty, and become more risk-averse. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic influence the individual's complex set of feelings, thoughts, behaviors, values, goals, and perspectives on the world.

During these circumstances caused by COVID-19 pandemic, altruism matters more than ever, because it is necessary for overcoming the outbreak. When discussing altruism, authors usually refer to the moral practice of concern for the happiness of others. It appears as a virtue in many cultures and is central to a various religions worldwide (Jenkins, 2020). However, if there is no sufficient motive, means and opportunity, altruism will not occur. It always requires the ability to assess and influence others' welfare. Altruism can also be undermined by fostering any seemingly incompatible beliefs. Therefore, it should be promoted as something common,



attractive and expected (Farsides, 2007). In this sense, the *effective altruism* movement grounded in practical ethics and Socratic philosophy, is showing to be of significant importance. According to Singer (2015), effective altruism is based on the idea that individual should do the most good he/she can. Looking at the two poles of the continuum, there is one pole which involves living the minimally acceptable ethical life that underline using a substantial part of the spare resources to make the world a better place for all people. On the other pole stands fully ethical life, according to which, individual should do the most good he/she can. When trying to summarize the characteristics of the effective altruism, one should be listing several important things. First, effective altruism is directed toward making a difference to the world, for example, by providing incentives for charities to demonstrate their effectiveness. Second, it gives the meaning in one's life, since by doing what is good and right, one feels good about him/herself in the same time. Third, effective altruism revoke the question that connects the psychological and philosophical perspective of whether people are driven by their inner feelings and desires, or the reason has the substantial role in determining the way a person live his/her life?

### 3. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, authors reviewed relevant literature and conducted data analyses of the articles in scientific journals as well as the latest news in popular texts, blogs and opinions in the media. Discursive analysis, comparative analysis and an interpretive text analysis were also made, in order to gain insight into the power of discourse in constituting practice.

*The main research question is whether the COVID-19 pandemic will produce more ego(centr)ism and moral disengagement, or would people become more cooperative and altruistic over time, especially after this whole state of pandemic is over?*

Consequently, the following hypothesis is formulated, stating that: Individual characteristics such as personality, personal values and emotional maturity would be more relevant to moral behavior of people, than the context of pandemic itself.

### 4. Would people become egocentric or cooperative after COVID-19: What does evidence show?

The lasting implications of the pandemic are still yet to come, but meanwhile, there is wide place for doing bioethical research. It is evident that moral distress, conflicts and mixed sentiments that affect everybody in different extent, are much related to the present global circumstances. In this sense, the fear and uncertainty are probably the two most frequent emotions among many individuals. In psychology, fear is understood as an adaptive response of the organism when danger is perceived. In other words, it is functional because it motivates the individual to engage in protective behavior. It is quite expected for people to experience such feelings, especially when witnessing shocking pictures of severely ill patients in the hospitals, knowing that many of them would probably die of this virus. Then, there are news on the media about lockdowns and quarantines that sometimes last for several days, so again, mentioned feelings appear understandable. In many countries around the globe, media register similar behavior of people in stores – people panicky buying products in huge amounts in order to satisfy the basic need for security and survival (at least in their heads) when the time of the lockdown comes.

In psychology, it is well known that people have natural tendency towards altruism, especially when it comes to the members of their own group. Even small personal sacrifices, such as

donation to charities are also counted as altruism. However, altruism could also be enhanced to its extremes, such as risking one's own life and wealth for helping complete strangers – there are examples of this during wars and during this pandemic, where health workers risk their own health and lives on daily basis, while helping severely ill patients (Savulescu & Wilkinson, 2020). According to Schaffner (2020), research show that crises generally bring out the best in people. Author refers to data from hundreds of case studies run by the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Centre, which indicate that when faced with disasters, the vast majority of individuals help one another, by engaging in altruistic and pro-social activities, such as volunteering, sharing goods and services, and even acts that may expose them to risk.

However, Nettle (2020), reports the recent data from studying the intuitive theories of human nature to adversity, together with his colleague Saxe, which are more pessimistic than optimistic. Namely, they asked participants about hypothetical societies where various events happen during epidemic and received bad predictions, such as that people would become more selfish and less moral; less cooperative and more nepotistic; less rule-bound and more likely to generate conflict. Participants also expressed greater perceived need for strong leadership and policing, as well as severe punishment for those who are not following the rules in such times. Furthermore, when asked about the response of their fellow citizens to the current real pandemic, participants also strongly predicted that other people will behave selfishly, compare to low or variable possibility of them behaving cooperatively. As Nettle points out, the participants are perceiving this pandemic as leading slightly more to conflict and distrust, than to solidarity. These findings could be explained by a perceived social threat, but also by a systematic gaps between the intuitive theories of behavior and the actual behavior of people in real-life situations.

There were many opportunities in the last couple of months for authors to search for the evidence of peoples' moral behavior. Whether it is the store, the hospital, at work, the waiting line in the bank or the post office, or even at home, some people stressed by the uncertainty (because that is what COVID-19 is called – “an invisible enemy”), could manifest egoistic or egocentric behavior, while others could be highly empathetic and altruistic. The former could be perceived, for example, when people panicky buy the last few products left on the shelves, fist-fights over toilet paper, profiteering and thinking only on themselves (Schaffner, 2020), or when people refuse to follow the safety rules for social distancing, or when someone refuse to donate blood plasma to save someone else's life.

On the other side, there are individuals who are giving donations to hospitals or to poor citizens, the young and healthy ones who shop for the elderly, women sewing face masks for free, musicians playing concerts outside to keep the positive spirit of the people (Schaffner, 2020), the organizations that provide their data bases of books, journals, arts, and software for free to the public (ex. museums, software companies, publishing companies etc.). Then again, there are those on the “first line of fire” – the healthcare workers, doctors and nurses, who are risking their own lives while trying everything they can to save the lives of others. They are facing their own moral dilemmas, balancing between available resources and their own conscience, sometimes forced by limited number of beds and respiratory machines to decide who is going to live, and who to die.

In the beginning of the pandemic, one of the most frequently heard phrase from the officials in many countries, was to keep “social distance” in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Then, after some time it has been reformulated into “physical distancing” as more appropriate phrase, since “social distancing” can imply a sense of staying away from the social connections so people could stop communicating with one another (Gudi, 2020). As

Hensley (2020) explains, social distancing refers to a distance across social boundaries. Thus, it can lead one to think about social distancing as minding only one's own health. Yet, it could also be truth that it is something people need to do to protect others. With such interpretation, social distancing leads to social responsibility and solidarity as ethical virtues (Vergin, 2020), that does not depend exclusively on feelings, but on a deeper sense of commitment to a higher, more noble cause than individual's self. The virtue of solidarity also includes a commitment to social justice, which is another very important bioethical issue in this time of pandemic (Vaughan Brakman, 2020). Following this, some philosophers and medical ethicists place social distancing as a moral imperative. According to Howard (as cited in Litvack, 2020), promoting health and saving lives is a morally good goal for society. Having in mind this, as well as considering research data which clearly show that social distancing contributes to halt the spread of the virus, it is logical to support the judgment that it is morally wrong not to practice social distancing.

However, everyday evidence show that not everyone is following this advice. Not everyone is keeping required physical distance in public. Not everyone is being empathic, altruistic and helping. As stated previously, there are many examples around the world of people behaving selfishly in the stores or elsewhere, fighting, profiteering and so on. So, it is obvious that people tend to advance their own interests at the expense of others. In many countries during May this year (ex. Germany, Britain, Poland, Belgium, Italy, USA, Australia, South Africa, Brazil)<sup>1</sup>, many people protested against the lockdowns. Why is this the case when Covid-19 is one of the 10 greatest pandemics in history of humanity<sup>2</sup>? There could be many answers to this. According to Howard (as cited in Litvack, 2020), poor logical reasoning of individuals demonstrated in the tendency to seek out or only listen to information that confirms what they already believe, could be one possible explanation of such behavior. The author also points out that many times practice show that people could be very self-interested and could display egoistic thinking which leads their actions afterwards. Hence, there are many examples of people refuse to stop partying, going out in cafeterias and restaurants, or gathering with friends in large groups, because they are not willing to give up the things they enjoy. In psychology, it is called *self-serving bias* present to various extent in every individual (Prentice, 2020). As an example of this, recently several new clusters of COVID-19 patients in North Macedonia appeared, provoked by weddings, birthday parties, home celebrations, religious gatherings and so on, which contribute significantly to the emergence of the second pick of the disease in the country.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Plagues were not uncommon during history. There were plagues in the ancient world too, such as the one in Athens in 430 BC, similar to COVID-19 in its behavior, symptoms, and ef-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/anti-lockdown-protests-around-the-world-idUSRTX7H61S>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://earth5r.org/covid-19-coronavirus-and-other-pandemics>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D1%88%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%82/a-53779962>. <https://360stepeni.mk/sobiraneto-vo-grupi-sozdate-novi-klasteri-na-kovid-19-vo-tetovo/>. <https://www.slobodnacropva.mk/a/30665470.html>. <https://24.mk/details/nov-klaster-vo-okhrid-gosti-na-semejna-veselba-za-novorodenche-zarazeni-so-kovid-19>.

fects. Although the culture and the way of living in that time were very different in many aspects compared to the present, the Epicurus teachings could also be applied today. In other words, people should try to be as calm and positive as possible, be thankful for what they have, review the way they have been living their lives, reassess their priorities and values and be focused more on their moral well-being, than on the material prosperity in order to achieve the peace of mind and true happiness (Smith, 2020).

Yet, having in mind some examples mentioned previously, an inevitable question arises: are some people too selfish to change their behavior? As Prentice (2020) advises, the modern science of moral decision making should be followed in looking for the answer. Relating this to the effective altruism explained before and the question of whether people are driven by their inner feelings and desires, or the reason has the substantial role in determining the way a person live his/her life, it seems that the former is obviously the case in many actions of some people during this pandemic. Therefore, now, more than ever is important to build “moral imagination” and a sense of shared identity so individuals could act more cooperatively. The fact is that human beings are not born to live as individual and separated atoms from others and the societies. The diseases like COVID-19 reminds every person of the importance of interdependence and interconnectedness (Khan, 2020), because if everyone look only after oneself, the humanity would lose chance to survive.

There is much goodness in the world, but there is also selfish and egoistic side of individuals and groups. Moral disengagement is closely linked to the self-regulation mechanisms of individual that need to be activated first. Thus, we should bear in mind, as Bandura (2016) points out, that some individuals can be both cruel and humane towards different people at the same time, or as Staub (2003) would say, people could both be good and bad. Hence, what is most important in the end, is that in even most extreme circumstances, how people would react highly depends on who they are, on their personality and values, on their emotional maturity. Some people would easily behave selfishly or aggressively, while others would be willing to die while saving the life of another, sometimes even a complete stranger. Thus, whether this “new normality/reality” after the COVID-19 pandemic will be optimistic and altruistic, or egoistic and morally disengaged, depends mostly on those who construct it – on us, the people.

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