

HSS317: Ethics/Assignment-5/24-March-2020/20171059/CSE

Deadly pandemics are often once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but when they do happen, they tend to cause havoc and kill thousands, even millions of people. A century ago, it was the ‘Spanish flu’ of 1918 and today, it is the COVID-19, disrupting billions of lives around the globe. Easily transmissible, cases of the virus have been exponentially growing in many places. Scientists are yet to discover an effective drug or medication against the virus, so in order to bring down exponential growth or ‘flatten the curve’ as it’s being commonly called, **countries are adopting the age-old teaching of ‘prevention is better than cure’, as there still is no ‘cure’ to the virus.** Prevention is in terms of complete lockdowns, travel bans, social distancing and so on, causing everyone to stay at home, causing the daily life schedule to go astray.

Taleb and Norman highly support this ‘overreaction’, saying it is the most ethical course of action to enact systemic precaution. Of course, the risk of being infected with the virus is probably lower than being infected with the common cold, and the risk of dying is even lower. Shutting down the world for this seems to be an ‘overreaction’, but a **necessary overreaction.** They believe that “one must panic individually in order to avoid systemic problems” and that we would be harming others if we do not take ‘ultra-conservative’ precautions.

It is highly evident from Taleb and Norman’s argument that they are concerned more about the well-being of the entire society, as opposed to the well-being of the individual. They say it is essential to take highly extreme measures as it would prevent systemic harm. Of course, it would not be ‘rational’ to just stay at home for a month doing nothing, but these ‘idiosyncratic’ risks need to be taken in order to ensure systemic safety. They say it would be selfish and even psychopathic to act ‘rationally’ here, clearly indicating that **they are using the concept of utilitarianism to say so.** The maximum happiness principle considers those actions to be ethically right which lead to a higher level of happiness, thereby maximising utility. The happiness of the individual is not as important as the well-being of the society. Taleb and Norman say it is selfish to not follow the extreme, irrational measures. **‘Selfish- is the keyword here,** which means that the person would be concerned with one’s own pleasure and lack consideration for other people. Clearly, the authors are against this selfishness as these sacrifices of locking down countries would ensure the survival of all people, promoting general happiness.

“The risk of a car accident may be greater for an individual, but smaller for society” further indicates that the authors believe in the utilitarian principle of maximising happiness. This precautionary principle may seem irrational. One may be tempted to ignore these irrational measures for his/her own problems, but it would put others’ lives at risk. For instance, say person A’s laptop has stopped working, due to which he is unable to watch movies and play

games. This would be highly inconvenient for him, especially while he is quarantined. The rational thing to do would be to get it fixed at the store, but this would increase the risk of the spread of infection, thereby putting others' lives at risk. Applying the maximum happiness principle, we see that in the first scenario, only A is affected as he would not be able to use his laptop. Moreover, his life isn't at risk either. But if he were to move out of his home, he would be putting the society at risk, thereby increasing the level of sadness (and hence, decreasing happiness). **The welfare and happiness of the society is more important than that of the individual.** This is the ethical view ascribed to the precautionary principle given by Taleb and Norman.

Ionnadis however has a very conflicting opinion to that given by Taleb and Norman. He says that we are making decisions without any reliable data. He calls the lockdowns, restrictions and other countermeasures being taken as 'draconian' and is worried about the consequences of such long-term lockdowns, as **it could lead to recessions and the crash of the world economy.** He says that the **data collected so far is utterly unreliable**, which is also true. He says that the fatality rate of the season flu is in fact, higher than the coronavirus and more people die of cancer and other diseases. The data we have currently about the number of people dying from COVID-19 is highly unreliable because when the autopsy is done, other viruses and bacteria are found as well. In his words, "a positive test for coronavirus does not mean necessarily that this virus is always primarily responsible for a patient's demise". He says **we need more data to be able to take such an extreme action.** Such lockdowns are going to result in financial and economic destructions and the health system would be overwhelmed and would eventually fall.

The worries and issues raised by Ionnadis are very valid. Such lockdowns would inevitably lead to huge financial crises and crash of the world economy. Its consequences would be devastating. But Taleb and Norman's ethical position **is not affected by this worry, simply** because they are employing the utilitarian principle of maximum happiness. **They hold life to be of a higher value of happiness than wealth and economy.** Yes, these lockdowns would cause recessions, but at least people would be alive! The utilitarian's standard for judging an act is the happiness of all people, **not of the agent alone.** For Taleb and Norman, there would be lesser sadness (and thereby, greater happiness) in the world economy crashing as compared to millions losing their lives due to the pandemic. Moreover, Ionnadis himself talks about the worst case scenario of the pandemic. He says that in the most 'pessimistic scenario', **40 million people would die.** But life would continue to exist, much like it did after the 1918 pandemic, with lesser people, but with a stable economy and a normal healthcare system. But if we were to take draconian measures now and pause life, billions of lives would be at stake in the near future. For him, **the latter would be more devastating than the former.** For him, the latter would lead to lesser sadness which is evidence for the fact that **Ionnadis himself is utilitarian!** He is also weighing both options and deciding which would lead to more happiness. The only difference is in the

definition of utility, as Ionnadis values a economically stable life more than life itself. For Taleb and Norman, there would be more sadness in death and disease and hence, they resort to 'irrational' actions. Their viewpoint would only be affected if one was to question the meaning of utility itself. As long as life is deemed more valuable than wealth and economy, there would be no problem. The people would be poorer and there might be lesser money, but they would certainly remain alive!

Another issue raised by Ionnadis is about the unreliability of data. We have seen the role of ethics in assessing evidence in the previous assignment. **However in this scenario, precisely because there is no data, we need to involve ethics!** If there were reliable data, we'd be confused to whether trust science or ethics, but here **since there is no data itself, it is essential to choose the action that is ethically and morally right**, the one that increases the general happiness. Ionnadis' worry is that we have no data and hence, no scientific foundation. There is no evidence here and hence, we must use ethics to evaluate the correct course of action. Mill says that we should directly turn to secondary principles as they are time tested and lead to general well being. The secondary principle of 'saving as many lives as possible' comes into play here, and Taleb and Norman decide to take such irrational measures to save others' lives, which is more valuable than anything else.

In response to Ionnadis' worry that more people die of other diseases like cancer or malaria, let us assume that 100,000 people were dying these diseases in a year. However, only 5000 people were to die of the COVID-19. If we were to not take any draconian measures, it would lead to 105,000 deaths in total. But if we were to stay home and lockdown countries, it would have the potential of saving those excess 5000 lives, thereby increasing happiness! Hence, it would be the ethical course of action to take. Yes, it's true that thousands die of cancer, but whether we lockdown or not would not help curb the diseases. It may help the seasonal flu, but we have already discovered drugs that can cure them - there is scientific evidence! However, there is no cure for the coronavirus and hence, it is essential to take such draconian measures to save lives.

Their take on the issue is pretty similar as both the articles aim to identify the worst case scenarios. It's just that their definition of utility varies and hence they take different stands on the issue. But Taleb and Norman's stance is not affected by Ionnadis, because they just want to increase the overall happiness.