



"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted". Covid-19, universal solidarity and well/ill-being

Science and Ethics of Happiness and Wellbeing



The Science and Ethics for Happiness and Well-being Initiative

Hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Science and Ethics for Happiness and Well-being initiative (SEH) first convened in November 2019 to begin exploring the science, ethics, and theology of happiness and well-being. It was decided that the group would bring together a diverse, multi-disciplinary group of theologians, philosophers, neuroscientists, psychologists, economists, and others, to explore the intersection of various thematic issues and human happiness and flourishing.

Our first topical meeting was to be devoted to poverty and well-being: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Unable to meet in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we delayed our meeting, and instead held a virtual webinar on the topic of the virus: "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

COVID-19 Around the World

A large portion of our meeting was devoted to presenting the status of the pandemic around the world. Participants discussed the impacts of, challenges from, and responses to the virus in their respective regions or countries. This conversation served as a vehicle for helping us to think about well-being, and helped us to focus in particular on the fragility and suffering of certain groups. As a

group dedicated to studying happiness and well-being, and guided by the moral teachings of the Catholic Church and other faith traditions, our first mission is to care about the well-being of the worst off: Those who mourn, and those who suffer.

One could understand the pandemic – the most serious global crisis since World War II – as an opportunity to reexamine our understanding of the fragility of life and our universal connectedness. The virus has spread to almost all of the world, claiming more than 450 thousand lives by mid-June. Mourning for those who have died and those who suffer may open our eyes to the beautiful and tragic reality of life and death, and the sacred and irreplaceable value of every person. To mourn the collective suffering generated by the pandemic (and its disproportionate impact on the marginalized and disregarded) is the first step towards truly loving one's neighbor as his or her own self.

Impacts on Happiness and Well-being

Our group discussed and debated the challenges posed by COVID-19 to the three central pillars of happiness and well-being: health, employment, and social protection (meeting basic economic needs).

Unemployment and a lack of meaningful work have affected the well-being of many. Adverse labor conditions have affected the well-being of essential workers continuing to work, and especially the poor, who are often those working at grocery stores, restaurant delivery, and public transportation.

In short, we see a diversity of research detailing the effects of the pandemic on the well-being of various populations around the world. Some groups need mental health services more than others. Some have become more vulnerable to domestic violence due to shelter-in-place protocols. Others are showing resilience, radical patience, and an increase in levels of prosociality and care. The virus brings good effects and bad effects, clearly hitting particular, vulnerable groups much worse.

Inequality and the suffering of the poor

The impact of the virus is felt most urgently and severely by the poor, minorities, and other vulnerable groups. The poor have the least capacity to adjust their work practices and to work from home. They are experiencing the greatest rise in unemployment and loss of income, and are without a buffer of financial assets. The digital divide is greatly worsening these inequalities. The poor often live in more polluted and congested urban areas, where long-term exposure to air pollutants increases the probability of dire outcomes from COVID-19 exposure. The poor also generally live in areas with fewer parks and coastal areas. This means that the poor face heightened adversities in quality of life during an economic shutdown, as they have no opportunities to visit safe green places during a period of weeks or months.

Moreover, it is no mere coincidence that during the pandemic, protests worldwide are soaring against racial and ethnic discrimination following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis just a day before our meeting. Racial discrimination in the United States has been witnessed in the harassment of black and Latino essential workers traveling to work, and prejudiced police interactions with people of color in public gatherings and/or not wearing masks. Those who suffer most from the direct or indirect effects of the pandemic are also often those facing preexisting injustice based on race or ethnicity.

Unequal outcomes

The impact of the virus on health and the economy has differed greatly from country to country, and in some cases from region to region. In emails following our meeting, participants disputed whether or not the epidemic was largely brought under control in the Asia-Pacific region (a region including mainland China, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and the ASEAN countries) through (1) Public health interventions instituted by effective political leadership (such as testing, tracing, and quarantining infectious individuals); (2) Shared social norms more amenable to wearing masks in public and a willingness to trust experts; or (3) The rigorous, private detainment of infected individuals and their close contacts, accompanied by an enforced loss of social liberties.

While death rates have been under ten per million in the Asia-Pacific countries, death rates in Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Switzerland span hundreds per million population. Particular countries in Europe, such as Austria, have done much better in containing the pandemic and keeping deaths low. Some associate the high death rates in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Brazil with a failure of political leadership and a pervasive, crude form of libertarian ideology. We will know much more about what worked and what didn't in the months and years to come, but for now we see only through a glass darkly.

Responsibilities and opportunities

We must acknowledge that the virus is here, and it has just begun its journey throughout our world. It's with us for the foreseeable future, and we must learn to live safely and keep others safe as well despite the virus. That is a responsibility on all of us.

There are ways by which communities and nations can get ahead of the virus. Many countries need to empower their public health systems and workers to prevent and control outbreaks, robustly and with social justice. We need to practice protocols of physical distancing and public health. Lockdowns are temporary emergency actions that must be followed by effective public health measures. Above all, we need to protect the vulnerable in a dignified and respectful way.

The scriptures say, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” What consolation do we have in this trying moment? COVID-19 presents opportunities to find creative solutions to pressing environmental, social, and economic issues.

Firstly, the virus has presented novel challenges to and potential benefits for holistic happiness and well-being. We are richer of time, but with poorer quality of personal encounters. We have reduced commuting time, which often has a significant negative impact on life satisfaction. Many, though not all, people have better work-life balance. We can experience a higher quality of relationships when we live together and share intense emotions – whether in positive or negative circumstances, and the coronavirus is no exception, in spite of physical distancing. Here there is an opportunity to capitalize on a greater experience of fellow feeling and sympathy.

Secondly, the pandemic clearly signals the need for a universal access to basic needs, including health, education, shelter, food, and other economic necessities. The digitalization of the economy following Covid-19, with the surge of e-commerce, e-offices, e-education, and so forth, will cause persistent changes in the labor market, and the loss of jobs for tens of millions of people. They will urgently need social protection. And members of society in general, need to be assured of the universal access to basic needs.

Thirdly, COVID-19 has produced lifestyles – challenges included – that produce lower pollution and are characterized by greater environmental sustainability. Emissions from commuting has been decreased. Air travel is drastically reduced. The majority of conferences, workshops, and meetings have gone online. We are challenged to continue finding ways *post-pandemic* to cut down our environmental footprints and combat climate change.

Fourthly, there exists an unprecedented opportunity for increasing and sharing data and evidence on happiness and well-being. Thousands of studies on well-being and COVID-19 have already been published or are under peer review, and this burgeoning literature can contribute to the scientific understanding of drivers of ill-being and well-being.

Fifthly, the crisis presents the opportunity to strengthen communal, national, and global solidarity. We need more than ever to foster a vision of life based upon the common good, which will guide conduct during global crises that are currently undermined by the ideology of libertarianism and by the lack of awareness of our interdependency with each other and the natural world. Religious solidarity is thriving, at least in parts of the world.

Finally, COVID-19 presents an opportunity for the West to learn from and enter into critical

dialogue and collaboration with China and other countries of East Asia. We can and should develop a language of engagement with China around universal values, with the West recognizing the profound strengths of Confucian traditions and the common commitment of all nations to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We should recall that the Universal Declaration was drafted with crucial inputs of Confucian wisdom and Chinese cultural values. As Pope Francis has urgently reminded us, “Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan.”