

## Medical Ethics: Moral Problems of the COVID–19 Pandemic

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STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY

Spring 2021

**Lecturer:** Greg Bognar

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**Time:** *Tuesdays 18:00–20:00,  
January 26 – March 9*

**Format:** Zoom

**Office hours:** by appointment (by email)

### Important dates

**Exam:** *March 16, 18:00–22:00*

**Essay Writing Meeting:**  
*March 23, 18:00–20:00*

**Essay Deadline:** *April 18*

**Essay Discussion:** *April 27, 18:00–20:00*

**Description.** In December 2019, a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, appeared in Wuhan, China. By February 2020, it spread to Europe and North America. On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic. By April, COVID–19, the disease caused by the virus, forced half of humanity into some sort of lockdown.

Many countries managed to “flatten the curve” during the spring and early summer. Nevertheless, a second wave in November led to further lockdowns in Europe. By the end of 2020, COVID–19 is projected to cause around 2 million deaths worldwide. It has also lead to a major economic crisis whose effects will be felt for years.

Without doubt, the pandemic has caused one of the greatest upheavals in modern history. It also raises profound philosophical problems. How should societies respond to a novel disease about which little is known initially? How should they deal with the uncertainties? How can the harms and benefits of various public health measures (e.g., lockdowns) be calculated and compared to the economic harms?

In some countries, hospitals were overwhelmed and healthcare professionals had to make life-and-death choices about whom to put on a ventilator or admit into the ICU. How can they make these life-and-death choices in an ethical way?

There are now vaccines that offer protection to those who do not have immunity against the virus. But in the beginning, there will not be enough vaccines for everyone. Priorities will need to be set. The guidelines for the distribution of this valuable resource should be just. But what principles of justice should be used?

The aim of this course is to provide an introduction to such moral problems. Many of the issues that the COVID–19 pandemic raises are problems within medical ethics; others touch broader philosophical issues as well as economics, public health, and political theory. The course will explore these areas as they relate to the ongoing pandemic.

This is an interdisciplinary and introductory course. No background knowledge in philosophy, public health, economics, or political theory is needed—just an interest in the most pressing public issue of our time!

**Format.** The course will be given entirely online, using Athena and Zoom. Special request: please use your camera if you can. Online discussions feel more natural if participants can see one another. The lectures will not be recorded.

The Zoom meetings will be password-protected. Zoom links and passwords will be announced on Athena in advance. When you log in, *please use your real name* as I won't know who you are otherwise.

If you cannot attend a lecture, please get in touch with me in advance.

**Readings.** There is no textbook for this course. All the required readings will be available on Athena; it is your responsibility to download and (if you want that) print them. If you have any technical problems, let me know.

**Assessment.** The course is divided into two parts. In the first part, we will have seven Zoom meetings in a combined lecture/seminar format. There will be an exam at the end. You can take this part of the course for 7,5 credit points. The second part will be independent work: for another 7,5 credit points, you can write a longer essay over a longer period of time, on a relevant topic that you can choose yourself (after consultation with me). The requirements of the essay will be discussed at a separate meeting. You can take both parts of this course or only the first one.

## Topics and Readings

### 1 Ethics and Public Health

January 26

*"Nobody knew there'd be a pandemic or an epidemic of this proportion. Nobody has ever seen anything like this before."* (US President Donald J. Trump, March 19, 2020)

What are some of the ethical issues when we consider the health of populations? How does public health ethics differ from clinical ethics? What ethical issues arise in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? We look at these questions and introduce the most important theories of normative ethics.

#### Required reading

MICHAEL T. OSTERHOLM AND MARK OLSHAKER. "Chronicle of a Pandemic Foretold." *Foreign Affairs* 99:4 (July/August 2020), 10, 12-14, 16-24.

### 2 Priority Setting

February 2

*"It's going to be, really, a voluntary thing. You can do it. You don't have to do it. I'm choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it, and that's OK. It may be good. Probably will. They're making a recommendation. It's only a recommendation."* (US President Donald J. Trump, April 3, 2020)

How bad is COVID–19? This is a more complicated question than it might seem. Many of the people it kills are already at a high risk of death. We don't yet know its long-term effects on morbidity, but even if we did, how could we tell how bad they are? In this class, we look at ways we can quantify the harm of mortality and morbidity in a population.

### Required reading

GREG BOGNAR AND IWAO HIROSE. *The Ethics of Health Care Rationing: An Introduction*. Chapter 2: “The Value of Health” and Chapter 3: “Ethics and Cost-Effectiveness.” New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 29–78.

## 3 Risk, Uncertainty, and Scientific Literacy

February 9

*“I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute, one minute, and is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside, or almost a cleaning? Because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it'd be interesting to check that.” (US President Donald J. Trump, April 23, 2020)*

Scientists had been warning us for a long time about the risk of a global pandemic. Were we prepared for it? The answer depends on how we should think about risks. For instance, it might be different if we consider COVID–19 a catastrophe. In this class, we will talk about how to understand risk and uncertainty, what makes an event a catastrophe, and how we can rationally prepare for such events.

*Guest lecturer:* H. ORRI STEFÁNSSON (Stockholm University)

### Required readings

H. ORRI STEFÁNSSON. “Catastrophic Risk.” *Philosophy Compass* 15:11 (2020), 1–11.

JULIAN SAVULESCU, INGMAR PERSSON, AND DOMINIC WILKINSON. “Utilitarianism and the Pandemic.” *Bioethics* 34:6 (2020), 620–632.

## 4 Locking Down and Opening Up

February 16

*“We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself. We're not going to let the cure be worse than the problem.” (US President Donald J. Trump, March 23, 2020)*

In response to COVID–19, governments instituted severe restrictions on civil liberties, like the freedom of movement. How can we justify such restrictions? How can we decide how strict they should be, especially when they are likely to cause considerable economic and other sorts of harm? In this class, we look at some proposals for making trade-offs between public health and economic policy.

*Guest lecturer:* ANTTI KAUPPINEN (University of Helsinki)

## Required reading

ANTTI KAUPPINEN. "How Not to Make Trade-Offs Between Health and Other Goods." Draft.

## 5 Rationing and Triage

February 23

*"There'll be a lot of death, unfortunately, but a lot less death than if this wasn't done. But there will be death."* (US President Donald J. Trump, April 4, 2020)

When hospitals are overwhelmed, healthcare professionals have to make choices about whom to put on a ventilator, admit into the ICU, or when to withdraw life-sustaining treatment. How can they make these life-and-death choices in an ethical way? What factors should they take into account? In this class, we discuss the underlying principles by looking at some of the actual guidelines that have been used during the pandemic.

### Required readings

SUSANNE JÖBGES, RASITA VINAY, VALERIE A. LUYCKX, AND NIKOLA BILLER-ANDORNO. "Recommendations on COVID-19 Triage: International Comparison and Ethical Analysis." *Bioethics* 34:9 (2020), 948–959.

#### Group A:

EZEKIEL J. EMANUEL, GOVIND PERSAD, ROSS UPSHUR, *et al.* "Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources in the Time of Covid-19." *New England Journal of Medicine* 382:21 (2020), 2049–2055.

#### Group B:

JULIAN SAVULESCU, MARCO VERGANO, LUCIA CRAXI, AND DOMINIC WILKINSON. "An Ethical Algorithm for Rationing Life-Sustaining Treatment During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *British Journal of Anaesthesia* 125:3 (2020), 253–258.

#### Group C:

ANGUS DAWSON, DAVID ISAACS, MELANIE JANSEN, *et al.* "An Ethics Framework for Making Resource Allocation Decisions Within Clinical Care: Responding to COVID-19." *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17:4 (2020), 749–755.

## 6 Testing, Vaccine Allocation, and Herd Immunity

March 2

*"Anybody that wants a test can get a test. That's what the bottom line is."* (US President Donald J. Trump, March 6, 2020)

Vaccines have been developed that offer protection to those who do not have immunity against the virus. But in the beginning, there will not be enough vaccines for everyone.

Priorities will need to be set. The guidelines for their distribution should be just. But what principles of justice should be used? And what are our individual obligation in ensuring herd immunity, especially when some people are likely to refuse vaccination?

*Guest lecturer:* NIKLAS JUTH (Karolinska Institute)

### Required readings

NIELS NIJSINGH, NIKLAS JUTH, AND CHRISTIAN MUNTHE. “Ethics of Screening.” In Stella R. Quah and William C. Cockerham (eds.) *The International Encyclopedia of Public Health*. 2nd edition, volume 3. Oxford: Academic Press, 2017, pp. 28–35.

ANGUS DAWSON. “Herd Protection as a Public Good: Vaccination and Our Obligations to Others.” In Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij (eds.) *Ethics, Prevention, and Public Health*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 160–178.

## 7 Science, Global Politics, Future Pandemics

March 9

*“It’s going to disappear. One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear.” (US President Donald J. Trump, February 27, 2020)*

Some countries have met the challenges of COVID–19 reasonably successfully; others, not so much. What makes a country resilient to the challenges posed by a pandemic? What can we learn from their examples? In the past, pandemics have changed societies in profound ways. What will the long-term effects of COVID–19 be?

### Required readings

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA. “The Pandemic and Political Order.” *Foreign Affairs* 99:4 (July/August 2020), 26, 28–32.

EZEKIEL J. EMANUEL, GOVIND PERSAD, ADAM KERN, *et al.* “An Ethical Framework for Global Vaccine Allocation.” *Science* 369:6509 (2020), 1309–1312.

WALTER SCHEIDEL. *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*. Chapter 10: “The Black Death.” Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (2017), pp. 291–313.

*Last update: January 15, 2021*