

**MORAL AND POLITICAL DILEMMAS  
AT THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:  
THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING**

**(forthcoming in a Festschrift for Nelson Gomes)**

**1. *Introductory remarks***

The coronavirus pandemic isn't over yet and we are already trying to imagine the post-covid era, in the hope that the crisis we have been going through may have made us somehow wiser. In fact, philosophers engage in abstract reflection on the human condition, as it appears in the light of what has been experienced as an unprecedented existential threat, but also participate in public debates concerning crucial ethical and political issues calling for urgent practical decisions. One wonders about the scope and the significance of their involvement in such debates, as well as about their wider role in helping elucidate our responses to serious challenges and in refining our sensibilities.

In what follows, I intend to focus on some particular dilemmas we have been confronted with at the time of the pandemic, with a view to highlighting and to assessing the contribution of philosophical reasoning to their resolution. However, I am not aiming only at understanding the justification of the conclusions I believe we should reach, and of the decisions we could eventually make, by appealing to specific theories, principles and arguments; I am also interested, conversely, in seeking a better grasp and a comparative evaluation of the strength of the latter. In any case, I will be relying on the methodological perspective of a "reflective equilibrium" between, on the one hand, our intuitions and considered judgments providing premisses of practical reasoning, and, on the other, theoretical principles sustaining them, aiming at their mutual elucidation and adjustment (Virvidakis, 2015).

Actually, due to the limitations of this article, my account shall be concise and somewhat schematic. The dilemmas, summarized in the form of disjunctions implying quandaries about alternative courses of action and presented in two groups (before and after the availability of vaccines) are much more complex and nuanced than they appear in their dense formulations. However, I have tried to avoid extensive reconstructions of the debates and of the positions to which I want to draw attention, also keeping bibliographical references to a minimum. The dilemmas that are

introduced first have a distinctively moral character and are followed by queries regarding decisions of a more legal and political nature. It could be pointed out that they all have practical implications, but they also reflect concerns for which we could employ the broader notion of the *ethical*.<sup>1</sup>

Thinking about the implications of possible responses to the pandemic could be regarded as amounting to an exercise in applied ethics, also partly involving metaethical and metaphilosophical considerations. Moreover, although I will be drawing mostly on moral and political philosophy, the concepts and arguments which I will employ are also relevant to reasoning in the area of law, especially constitutional law. Last but not least, my analysis may extend to queries preoccupying contemporary philosophy of science.

Naturally, philosophers taking seriously the ideal of interdisciplinarity and the method of *wide* reflective equilibrium will eventually have to rely on exchanges not only with fellow philosophers, but also with biologists, doctors and other health professionals, lawyers, judges, social scientists, policy makers, journalists and intellectuals expressing public opinion. To be sure, I do not pretend to corroborate the premisses of my arguments by providing detailed empirical evidence, which would require a systematic scientific investigation of the evolution and of the current state of the pandemic. Thus, I will be concentrating mainly on aspects of the experience of the health crisis and on the broader issues that they raise, as they are perceived in Greece in September 2022, also presupposing acquaintance with basic data from all over the world, easily accessible through the international media and the internet.

## ***2. Facts and issues to be taken into account***

Before we begin our discussion, we should be reminded of some generally acknowledged facts which have by now become more or less common knowledge. They may still be disputed by people lacking adequate information or the education required to interpret it, as well as by those who put forth conspiracy theories and by

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am referring to the distinction between the concept of the “moral”, understood as concerning principles dictating our duties to our fellow people and that of the “ethical” interpreted as pertaining to broader issues about how one ought to live (Virvidakis 1996: 7n1, 2014b: 74n20).

those likely to be fooled by them. However, they cannot be ignored by anyone trying to assess the severity of the challenges we have been facing.

The spread of Covid-19 has undoubtedly constituted a serious threat to public health. The infection by some of its variants caused heavier symptoms and higher death rates than most kinds of flu, even in wealthy countries. The vaccines (those based on mRNA technology and some produced by traditional methods) have been a game changer, to the extent that three or four doses do prevent, if not infection and mild illness, especially in the case of very contagious variants, serious symptoms, hospitalization and death, at least if patients do not suffer from comorbidities, usually appearing in old age.<sup>2</sup> Still, even in countries where vaccination covers most of the population, the Covid-19 pandemic hasn't yet been fully eradicated or transformed into a more benign endemic disease such as the seasonal flu as we know it. As these lines are being written, one worries that new spikes might arise, not only in parts of the world where protective measures are no longer implemented, but even in areas of China, where a "zero covid" policy seems to have come close to stamping out the virus.

The agonizing experience of those in critical condition, taken into intensive care units, usually undergoing intubation, and often ending their lives in the hospital, was compounded by the strict isolation, necessary to protect the medical personnel (who wear heavy protective suits and gear) and their relatives, not allowed to come close to them. Thus, they died without being able to embrace, or even see, say a last farewell and be comforted by their loved ones.

Now, it is easy to understand that such circumstances, calling for immediate practical decisions and political action facilitating their implementation, have provided occasions for philosophical reflection at various levels. To begin with, one may dwell on the results of a careful study of our lives during the pandemic, offering new insights into the human condition, which have made us dramatically aware of the contingency, the finitude and the fragility of our existence. The fear of the invisible and intangible virus, the spread of which seemed to evade our efforts to contain it, was gradually transformed into a deeper, indeterminate anxiety about terminal

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<sup>2</sup> Here, it should be noted that most recent types of the Omicron variant are more contagious, though apparently less virulent and lethal and cause less serious infections. In any case, the symptoms are mitigated by the widespread use of available vaccines.

suffering and mortality. Indeed, it is worth pursuing a philosophical investigation of these broader issues and of their ethical significance (Velázquez 2020). Nevertheless, our discussion will bypass the rise of existential concerns and will move to more concrete moral and political matters.

### ***3. Concepts, theories, norms, principles and values***

I have already alluded to the philosophical toolkit which would be needed for the pursuit of our task. Among its contents we should highlight a few interpretive concepts, as well as normative theories and principles that are usually invoked, explicitly or tacitly, by moral and political philosophers, at least in the analytic tradition.

These include: a) General approaches or orientations in normative ethics, such as *consequentialism*, *deontology* and *virtue ethics*, seeking the basic criterion of moral assessment of actions and of the rules which guide them, respectively, in their consequences, in their intrinsic features – regardless of consequences, and in the virtues, that is, in the excellent character traits of agents; b) particular normative theories, expressing the above approaches, namely, *utilitarianism*, *Kantian deontology* and *Neo-aristotelian* or other variants of contemporary *virtue-ethics*; c) the main concepts and principles corresponding to the theories just mentioned. These are: the *principle of utility*, dictating the pursuit of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” of people; the *moral law*, which, according to Kant, requires as a *categorical imperative* that one should act “only in accordance with that maxim through which one can at the same time will that it become a universal law”, and so that one “uses humanity, whether in one’s own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means” (Kant 1996, 73, 80); and *ethical virtue*, to be exercised along with *intellectual virtue*, conceived as a form of *practical wisdom*, enabling us to act in the proper way in a wide range of particular circumstances. d) Moving to political philosophy, we may have to refer to conceptions of *liberal democracy* (prioritizing respect for individual rights and the value of freedom), and to more *communitarian* forms of social organization (laying emphasis on the preservation and promotion of the *common good*).

We should eventually appeal also to principles of *autonomy* entailing *liberties* and *rights*, as well as to conceptions of *justice*, presupposing ideas of *equality* and imposing practices of fair treatment, and, if we follow John Rawls' influential account, concern for the benefit of the "least advantaged" social groups (Rawls, 1999: 64-9). Here, it must be noted that the actual implementation of most of the above norms and principles requires the application of an auxiliary *principle of proportionality*, balancing the goals aimed at and the consequences of the courses of action to be followed, which plays an important role in a variety of key arguments deployed in applied ethics and in juridical and legal practice. As we shall see, the severity of the emergency measures at the time of the coronavirus pandemic must respect the rights of those who are going to be affected by them, as much as possible, and proportionality considerations help us determine a threshold which should not be breached.

The above exposition is admittedly very sketchy and doesn't provide precise definitions or interpretations which would be required by technical philosophical analysis.<sup>3</sup> However, it may suffice for a basic understanding of the concepts and the principles we have tried to introduce as a preamble to the examination of a series of dilemmas besetting our lives during the pandemic. To these we must now turn.

#### **4. Particular dilemmas I**

At the beginning of the pandemic crisis and during its first phase, before the production and the distribution of effective vaccines, most governments were confronted by dilemmas which could be formulated succinctly through the following disjunctions:

a) Active protection of everyone's life and health through restrictive measures (mostly lockdowns and quarantines, extensive limitations of free movement, social distancing, mandatory use of masks in closed and crowded spaces and also suspension of various work and recreational activities), *or* maintenance of the normal operation of free markets (regular production and consumption of goods, open enterprises and shops,

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<sup>3</sup> I have also omitted references to the works of philosophers who first defined and elaborated many of the concepts and principles that I will be using. The relevant information, as well as details of interpretation of the theoretical resources described in this section can be easily found in introductory books and articles (Rachels & Rachels 2019, and Kymlicka 2002).

everyday business transactions and continuation of services, etc.), saving jobs and consistently promoting the unfettered growth of the economy.

b) Pursuit of “herd immunity”, through relaxation, or even suspension of restrictive measures, recommended by committees of health professionals, thus allowing the infection of the majority of the population and consequently putting at risk the lives of the most vulnerable members of society (the elderly and those with underlying illnesses and comorbidities), *or* care for the protection of everyone, especially those who needed it most, that is the most vulnerable, old and weak.

c) *Selection* of the patients suffering from Covid-19 to be admitted to intensive care units of hospitals, if the public healthcare system could not provide sufficient facilities and personnel to cope with the emergencies of the pandemic, - according to criteria related to prognosis or evaluation of the social utility to be maximized –, *or* equal treatment of all patients, perhaps on a “first come first serve” basis, or by resorting to a kind of lottery.<sup>4</sup>

d) Concern for the common good, conceived as consisting in ensuring the survival and the health of most members of the community, *or* unconditional respect for individual rights and liberties, even of those who are ready to disobey emergency laws and to violate restrictive measures regarding them as illicit limitations of their autonomy.

e) Justified legislation and implementation of more or less authoritarian policies (because of the requirements of a state of emergency regarded as a state of exception), *or* full conformity to constitutional guarantees of liberties.

Here, we shall not engage in a detailed analysis of these dilemmas which would involve the careful examination and weighing of all aspects of the alternatives we are presented with and of their many practical implications. What we are interested in

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<sup>4</sup> Such criteria are presented and discussed in special articles dealing with issues regarding the admission to ICUs. These issues are not limited to the treatment of Covid-19 patients, but the peculiar circumstances of pandemic emergencies have made the relevant questions particularly pressing. Thus, it has been observed that one could prioritize: those most likely to survive the current illness, those most likely to live the longest after recovery (considering comorbid conditions), those who have lived through fewer life stages (the younger), those who have a particular narrow social utility to others in a pandemic, the worst off, or use a lottery (Robert *et al.* 2020).

mostly are the norms and values which may determine our choices. Even if they are not mentioned explicitly in the arguments put forth respectively on each side, they could be invoked to buttress the main premisses from which we shall draw our conclusions. Their function in our reasoning reflects, to an important extent, the strength of more or less common intuitions which lend them support.

Thus, the first option in (a) and the second option in (b) express the recognition of the absolute value of human life, and of the primacy of health of all individuals (with special attention to those more endangered by the pandemic). They rely on the conviction that deontological norms commanding the respect for the values at issue take precedence over any utilitarian calculus, which would allow some of the weak to perish, with a view to promoting the interests of forward looking, younger and healthier social groups, and also to cater for the requirements of a well-functioning economy.

Now, governments in Great Britain and in Sweden originally favored policies aiming at herd immunity, while many (predominantly Republican) States in the U.S.A., encouraged by populist leaders, rejected measures which would harm the economy. On the contrary, most countries in Europe and elsewhere seemed to prioritize the protection of life and health of all. Politicians and intellectuals trying to downplay the severity of the pandemic, or to support the view that avoiding long term damage to economic activities would be worth jettisoning the safety of supposedly less socially useful groups, such as the elderly, didn't prevail.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, a utilitarian approach, regarding the admission and treatment of patients in hospitals, especially in ICUs, would have to be adopted, if the healthcare system reached a breaking point and its collapse appeared imminent. There were moments in the first months of the pandemic (in Italy, Brazil, India and some places in the U.S.A), when we felt that triage practices would be unavoidable. So, the first horn of dilemma (c) above would then have to be chosen and Kantian or other deontological directives sustaining the alternative option would be given up. The vulnerable and the weak would be at a disadvantage in such cases, because priority

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<sup>5</sup> It would be worth studying the debates among French philosophers, such as Jean-Pierre Dupuy, criticizing Covid-19 scepticism and negationism and defending precautionary and restrictive measures, and André Comte-Sponville pleading in favor of giving precedence to the rights and needs of those pursuing normal economic activities (Dupuy 2021). For a balanced introductory approach, see Bichler 2021.

would be accorded to the ones more likely to survive and recover.<sup>6</sup> However, this should be regarded as a second line of action and its choice should be conceded only as imposed by circumstances of *force majeure*.

Legal and political arguments to the effect that liberal principles require the unconditional respect of the rights and liberties of those who reject any kind of restriction of their movements and activities as unconstitutional and as an infringement upon their autonomy, shouldn't be accepted. The rights to life and good health, regarded as part of the common good which a government must protect, override the rights invoked by the reckless minority who oppose the measures. Moreover, at this point, we could appeal to a *Kantian* notion of autonomy, entailing self-limitation and the full respect of the rights of our fellow human beings, which is much stronger than the *liberal* version supposedly justifying disobedience to restrictions imposed in order to avert the dangers of the pandemic. Thus, the second option of dilemma (d) has to be rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, (e) is a dilemma which seems to emerge from broader political considerations, concerning threats to liberal democracies because of measures, which according to some intellectuals, both on the right and on the left extremes of the political spectrum, jeopardize our constitutional liberties. In fact, some philosophers, who end up indirectly supporting unjustified conspiracy theories and also forms of virus negationism, denounce the austere policies against the pandemic, implemented by many Western governments. According to their allegations, these governments aim at using the pretext of the need of a "state of exception", in order to intensify, expand and prolong a nefarious biopolitical control. Such a control is supposedly already being exercised, to an important extent, by politicians and health administrators in contemporary capitalist societies. However, it could be observed that in this case we are dealing with a false dilemma, insofar as these arguments, put forth by thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, drawing partly on Michel Foucault's theories about biopolitical power, do not seem to need elaborate refutation, apart from an appeal to

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<sup>6</sup> See above, note 4.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek Supreme Court (Conseil d'État) has thus rejected appeals against the measures imposed by the government, invoking the superior good of the protection of the population from the pandemic. There were also similar court decisions regarding the measures of mandatory vaccination, based on analogous arguments. See below, section 5.

common sense (Bratten 2021, Agamben, Nancy & Esposito, 2022).<sup>8</sup> Of course, one may agree that the constitutional guarantees of respect for our rights and liberties do require the vigilance of democratic citizens, who will make sure that the authoritarian measures will be relaxed or revoked entirely, as the threat of the pandemic subsides and, hopefully, disappears. In fact, it may be true that some authoritarian regimes, such as China, have been rather successful in containing the coronavirus, but it is also true that some liberal governments, such as those of New Zealand or Iceland were equally or more successful.

### ***5. Particular dilemmas II***

The availability of reliable vaccines, which were tried and approved for use only nine to ten months after the onset of the pandemic has given rise to different, but rather analogous dilemmas, which are still being discussed, although they became less pressing in the latest phase, characterized by a surge of new cases of infection, but without a similar increase in hospitalizations and deaths. They could be summarized as follows:

a) Imposition of mandatory vaccination, if not on all citizens, at least on certain age and professional groups (such as all people over 60, health professionals working both in the public and the private sector, and all those whose jobs involve close interaction and proximity with others, perhaps including teachers and members of police), entailing serious sanctions, fines and/or additional restrictions, “making life difficult” for those who violate the relevant law by refusing to be vaccinated, *or* full respect for the rights and liberties invoked by the latter to sustain their refusal.

b) Differential or discriminatory treatment of anti-vaxxers, not so much as an additional sanction, but rather as a just way of catering for the needs of other patients in serious condition, who might be left out of intensive care units because of the priority accorded to acute Covid-19 emergencies, *or* equal consideration of all,

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I am perhaps being overtly optimistic. There are still philosophers, jurists and social scientists who seem to be convinced by such views, warning us about a dystopian transformation of various institutions, including Universities, due to the eventual continuation of measures (such as distant learning and remote working) imposed in order to ensure protection from the pandemic (Forest, 2020). I think that their fears are exaggerated, to say the least.

prescribing urgent care also for ill anti-vaxxers, requiring medical assistance, despite their irresponsible and reckless behavior.

c) Suspension or limitation of the freedom of expression of anti-vaxxers, by imposing restrictions on favourable media (TV, radio, press) coverage, and on their own use of internet sites and social media spreading misinformation, *or* full, equal protection of freedom, even for the expression of unpalatable, foolish and often dangerous views concerning vaccines.

d) Free distribution of vaccines by governments of wealthy, developed countries, not only to their own citizens, but also to people in developing countries, and implementation of measures to ordain vaccine patent waivers and to impose limits on the profits of pharmaceutical companies, *or* refusal to interfere in the free market of vaccines and antiviral drugs.

Once more, we encounter lines of reasoning that we have already isolated in our responses to the dilemmas presented in the previous section. I would like to argue, that the justification of most of the options we want to defend in the cases at hand is more clearcut. This is due to the fact that most normative theories do converge in the recognition of important values and of the priorities they indicate and in the conclusions arrived at through the application of their principles. We shouldn't however think that it is much easier to promote the implementation of the required policies that seem to be sustained by our insights. .

Now, when we focus on dilemma (a) it seems that the imposition of mandatory vaccination, at least on health professionals, doctors, nurses and carers who are exposed to a higher risk of infection, and who could easily carry the virus in hospitals and institutions such as homes for the elderly and the disabled, is justified both on *consequentialist* and *deontological* grounds. Such a measure could be extended to people over 60 or 65 years old, not just out of a paternalistic concern, "for their own good", but mainly because of the need to reduce the viral load circulating in the community, protect others, and eventually prevent more mutations. Moreover, the pursuit of the maximization of utility for the greatest number, as well as compliance with the Kantian categorical imperative, commanding respect for our own lives and

health, but also for those of our fellow human beings, could also provide sufficient justification for sanctions against those who refuse to be vaccinated. Such sanctions amount to a form of indirect coercion, which is deemed necessary when positive incentives or simple “nudging” don’t work. Admittedly, they shouldn’t be excessive and could be determined according to principles of proportionality. People subjected to them wouldn’t be imprisoned or fired from their jobs, but could be suspended for the period of the crisis, or/and obliged by the government to pay fines. Anyway, the social benefit of severe but reasonable sanctions outweighs the cost of the limitations on the exercise of rights of those disobeying the law and endangering others and of the damage inflicted upon their interests. Still, their punishment should be always proportional to their offense and shouldn’t threaten their subsistence.

At this point, it may be observed that we should be careful in endorsing policies targeting people who resist the main effort to combat the pandemic through universal vaccination. We should be ready to acknowledge more or less fine distinctions among groups or individuals who refuse to be vaccinated for psychological or ideological reasons. Such reasons range from vaccine hesitancy, because of doubts about the effectiveness of vaccines, or fears of the risk of serious long-term side-effects, to active support for the anti-vaccine movement and to sometimes aggressive, militant action against health and political authorities.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we may first want to try to cure them from their fears, or remedy their lack of trust in science, making sure adequate information is communicated in the proper way, but we have to admit that conspiracy theories and some forms of anti-systemic ideologies, embraced by the most extreme anti-vaxxers, and by virus negationists for that matter, are very difficult to deal with. In order to make their supporters change their views, one needs to resort to special psychological techniques and kinds of persuasion, and even these may fail (Uscinski 2019, McIntyre 2021). At the end of the day, one may realize that it is futile to persist in the effort to overturn recalcitrant opinions of this kind and that recourse to coercive and punitive measures cannot be avoided.

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, we could also draw on more general discussions of “conscientious objection to vaccination”, for various religious, moral and political reasons, which go back to the confrontation with anti-vaccine movements before the pandemic (Clarke, Giubilini & Walker 2017). Here, it should be noted that in Greece many anti-vaxxers and virus negationists have been encouraged by some conservative circles of the Orthodox Church, despite the official directives of the Archbishop and of the Holy Synod.

However, when it comes to dilemma (b), which in Greece seemed to preoccupy a few doctors and health administrators, we are inclined to reject the first horn. The duty to try to provide public healthcare services to all those who need them, including emergency treatment in ICUs, however scarce or costly, even if the behavior of the patients has been irresponsible and reckless, is dictated by basic deontological principles of biomedical ethics, reinforced by empathy and compassion, which should normally override utilitarian considerations and would not permit any kind of cruel retributive measures. Discriminatory practices, involving differential treatment as a form of punishment, are not justified. In analogous cases, one wouldn't refuse or delay the treatment of cancer patients who are heavy smokers or drinkers, even though insurance companies may charge a much higher price to provide full coverage of their medical expenses.

Moving to dilemma (c) we realize that an adequate analysis of the alternatives it presents us with would require a lengthy attempt to adjudicate the thorny issues regarding freedom of expression that it raises. Here, we can simply highlight the difficulty to legislate and to enforce constraints on the right to free speech, in any full-fledged and well functioning liberal democracy, even with a view to protecting higher goods, such as the safety or health of the majority of the population. To be sure, it is not true that the exercise of this right knows no bounds. Nonetheless, we should hesitate to propose laws which ban in advance the favorable coverage, or the promotion of the views of anti-vaxxers, out of fear that they will turn out to be harmful. The expression of false and foolish claims against the safety or the efficiency of the vaccines, which we may regard as dangerous, or even of crazy conspiracy theories about their production and dissemination, should be tolerated and countered mainly, as much as possible, by effective scientific argumentation. Prohibitions and control of the use of the internet and of social media appear to be equally problematic, also for technical, apart from political reasons, although some form of regulation could eventually be attempted. Anyway, prior censorship would be very hard to justify and the first option should be rejected.

The last dilemma (d) in our list, would also necessitate a careful consideration of political concerns, insofar as its first horn entails the need to interfere in a more or less direct way in the operation of the free market, which allegedly plays an important role in the efficient production and distribution of most goods, including drugs and

vaccines. It could be maintained that the spectacular success of scientists collaborating all over the world has been made possible by an unprecedented, joint and strenuous effort, which has been partly motivated and sustained by the pursuit of profit by individuals and by the companies for which they work (such as Pfizer, Moderna and Astra Zeneca). However, I am convinced that it would be worth trying to impose some limits on the unfettered commercialization of the products of medical research. Investment in such research and decisions about the production and distribution of its products shouldn't be regulated only by blind market forces. In fact, most researchers involved in the discovery of vaccines would certainly deny that profit was the main motivation driving their admirable work. Thus, I would opt for a version of the first horn for serious humanitarian reasons. In any case, I do believe it is a shame that the international community hasn't yet been able to provide vaccines to less wealthy, developing countries. It could also be argued that the reasons supporting this view are not just moral and humanitarian, but also prudential, because combating Covid-19 all over the world, would help avoid further mutations, which could spread also in wealthy countries. If such mutations were prevented or stopped at an early stage, everyone would benefit.

## **6. *Applied philosophy for the pandemic***

We can now go back to the questions we hinted at in the introduction of this paper and venture some answers. What have we learned about the pandemic and about the most effective practical ways to cope with it by resorting to philosophical reflection, more particularly to normative thinking, informed by moral and political philosophy? And conversely, what can we gather from our analysis about the applicability of philosophical concepts, principles and theories themselves and about their more general usefulness?

We have seen that the dilemmas presented above allow us to test our philosophical tools in the study of intuitions regarding apparently conflicting values and in the elaboration of arguments supporting particular decisions. Actually, the solutions proposed and endorsed in most cases in Western democracies, by liberal politicians, administrators, judges and, most importantly, by health professionals, reveal their commitment to the priority of the protection of life and health of all

citizens over the maintenance and the growth of a well-functioning free economy. Thus, it is confirmed that deontological constraints imposing respect for basic rights and equal treatment of all, justify restrictive measures and trump utilitarian considerations. Consequentialist reasoning, leading to triage and similar practices in hospitals, is unavoidable in emergencies, when, due to extreme pressure and lack of resources, the health system is threatened by imminent collapse. Moreover, when it comes to legislating and enforcing policies of vaccination, indispensable for fighting the pandemic, measures of indirect coercion in the form of sanctions may have to be adopted, and certain liberties may have to be curtailed for some period and to some extent, always in conformity with a principle of proportionality, dictating moderation.

It is clear that the abstract concepts and the principles which we have marshalled in our attempt to justify the options we consider to be correct, help sustain our premisses and can be invoked in more or less lengthy argumentation deployed at some level in the context of legal and political debates. However, they are not particularly useful for people who haven't studied much philosophy, deliberating about what to do in particular circumstances, when they are obliged to make difficult practical decisions, often under pressure. It is at this point that we should pay attention to the traits of character of agents confronted by moral quandaries during the period which concerns us. We are thus led to draw on insights provided by virtue ethics, to which we haven't appealed in our analysis so far. It may turn out that we can't properly evaluate responses to the pandemic, without appreciating the role of certain virtues, and also of weaknesses and vices in determining attitudes and in guiding action.

Indeed, I would like to argue that the pandemic makes it possible to realize the importance of basic and traditional moral virtues, such as courage, patience and perseverance, resilience, compassion and solidarity. These are clearly displayed in the admirable behavior of doctors, nurses and administrators, and of many of those with jobs necessary to feed, transport, educate, protect or cater to various needs of their fellow people, thus exposing themselves to a significant risk of contracting Covid-19. Here, it should be noted that intellectual or epistemic virtues also contribute significantly to coping with the many challenges we have had to face. It may suffice to think of the virtues of the scientists at the front line of biomedical research, who made possible the discovery, the testing and the fast production of

vaccines, including ingenuity, assiduousness, openness of mind and collaborative spirit. Actually, their efforts exemplify the coordination of both epistemic and moral virtues characterizing the best researchers committed to the pursuit of truth, but also to humanistic values inspiring the will to serve their fellow human beings. Philosophy of science can learn a lot from the impressive successes, but also from the shortcomings and difficulties encountered in various practices, including applied research and science communication. Unfortunately, the latter was not particularly successful, at the time of the pandemic (Oswald, Lewiński, Greco, & Vilata, 2022). In fact, the understanding of the function of virtues, moral and epistemic, provide an additional justification of some of the solutions of dilemmas which we have tried to defend. Conversely, anti-vaxxers offer negative examples, making evident the price of the lack of prudential and moral virtues, and also the disastrous role of vices, such as selfishness, and, quite often, plain stupidity.

To be sure, I don't want to downplay the force of objections to the dominant conceptions of virtue ethics and I am not going to claim that the appeal to excellent, dispositional properties of human character can by itself lead to satisfactory solutions of the dilemmas examined in this paper. Still, the function of virtues in human behavior, even if it may be disputed by those who deny their psychological reality and their practical effectiveness, could be regarded as a supplementary hypothesis regarding the pursuit of right action, which does account for the steadfastness of moral thinking and acting and supplements the explanation of how normative principles can and do motivate (Virvidakis 2014a). Virtues (and vices) should not be excluded from any analysis of moral experience at the time of the pandemic, particularly insofar as we are interested in understanding our responses to a series of crucial dilemmas.<sup>10</sup>

## ***7. Concluding remarks – suggestions for further discussion***

At this point, we can sum up our tentative conclusions and perhaps engage in speculation about the prospects of the post-pandemic era. Despite the deaths, the ordeal and the ongoing suffering of so many people all over the world, some of the

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<sup>10</sup> I have dealt with a virtue-ethical approach to the pandemic in “Vertus épistémiques et vertus morales à l'épreuve de la pandémie”, forthcoming in a Festschrift for Claudine Tiercelin.

lessons we have learned during the past two years constitute a net gain for humanity, which must not be underestimated.

Philosophy has helped us improve our comprehension of the crisis and has cast light on the phenomenology of the painful experience we have had to endure, providing new insights into the human predicament. The conceptual tools it provides have been instrumental in the construction of convincing arguments for the defense of the positions we want to advance when we are faced with moral and political dilemmas, corroborating or questioning intuitions on one or another side. Not only academics and intellectuals, philosophers themselves and theologians, jurists, educators and journalists, but also governmental officials, scientists and health professionals serving in special committees, who draft and recommend policies to be implemented in order to deal with the challenges of the pandemic, draw on the resources of philosophical thinking, directly or indirectly. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that what we have been going through has been an occasion for more intense and broad ranging philosophizing.

However, it should be acknowledged that the obvious lessons of the pandemic do not require much technical philosophical analysis.<sup>11</sup> The virtues displayed by people affected by the pandemic, in trying to cope with the various emergencies, to contain the spread of the virus and to take care of others, show humanity at its best. The successes of biomedical research and the advances of vaccine technology reveal the potential of good scientific practices, involving close collaboration of top specialists in various countries.

On the other hand, we must also learn from the failures of many supposedly advanced healthcare systems, due to inadequate planning and inefficient coordination (Sacks et al. 2022). Moreover, we should definitely improve channels and methods of communication among scientific experts, policy makers and the wider public, building trust in science through proper education and through the cultivation of rational thinking and of the epistemic virtues which sustain it. Finally, we can only deplore the inadequate responses of our democratic societies to moral imperatives of

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<sup>11</sup> There are already many books and articles developing more or less systematic reflection on the impact of the ongoing crisis, dwelling on the new scientific, technological, geopolitical and social prospects for the post-pandemic era, in particular countries and worldwide, which could be consulted in this context. (Boniface 2020, Le Goff 2020, Zakaria 2020, Renaut, A. & Lauvau 2021, Oswald, Lewiński, Greco & Vilata 2022).

justice, which enjoin us to try to remedy inequalities among social groups and individuals, aggravated due to various factors at the time of the pandemic, and, last but not least, to cater for the needs of those beyond our borders, especially regarding the availability and fair distribution of effective vaccines.

All these concerns call for further interdisciplinary study and could constitute the object of more research and publications. Philosophy could and should play a critical guiding role in coordinating relevant discussions at various levels. We can close this article by expressing the conviction that it will keep contributing not only to the resolution of moral and political dilemmas, but also to the adjudication of a wide range of post-covid issues.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Earlier drafts of this paper have been presented at a FISP symposium in Copenhagen in December 2021, at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in March 2022 and at the symposium on “Global Problems and Philosophy”, organized by FISP and the Korean Philosophical Association in Seoul in May 2022, while a version in French is forthcoming in *Diogène* (no 275). I would like to thank George Boutlas, Vasso Kindi, Philip Kitcher, Evangelos Protopapadakis and Alexios Stamatiadis-Bréhier, as well as the participants in the above events for their comments and remarks at various points of my argumentation. I have also drawn on Greek publications by Kindi and Protopapadakis regarding these issues.

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