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Nikolina Smiljanić

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERDEPENDENCE AND RESPONSIBLE EPISTEMIC BEHAVIOR IN CRISES

ABSTRACT

Recently, we found ourselves in an unexpected and specific situation facing the COVID-19 pandemic which we wanted to understand. It was a situation that no one predicted, and we all wanted to know more about it using various epistemic practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our lives and has emphasized the importance of behaving in a mutually interdependent manner, as we are directly responsible for the lives and health of others in these circumstances. This paper emphasizes the importance of interdependence and epistemic responsibility of individuals within society and policymakers who bear a particularly heavy epistemic responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic and possible future crises.

KEYWORDS

interdependence, responsible epistemic behavior, epistemic duties, epistemic responsibility, beliefs.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, citizens were constantly warned through the media about the public health recommendations and measures that were essential to save lives and prevent the spread of the virus. These recommendations were followed by the government, policies were put in place, and experts took center stage and addressed people through the media. It was a unique situation, the likes of which we have never experienced before, and although the recommendations and actions were sometimes contradictory, they had a great impact on our lives. This paper challenges the epistemic duty and responsibility of individuals and policymakers and emphasizes the importance of interdependence.

Philosophical Implications of the Topic

The importance of social epistemology in understanding what is happening is crucial. For individuals to understand what is expected of them, they must



understand what is going on and why. However, we found ourselves in a particular situation where, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, knowledge about the effects of the virus was still unclear and people could only follow the recommendations of those who determine public policy and certain behaviors in times of the crisis. In this case, the question is: what are the responsibilities of policymakers whose decisions shape responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and how do policymakers fulfill their epistemic duty responsibly, i.e., how do they acquire knowledge in times of uncertainty and disagreement among experts? The other question is how individuals fulfill their epistemic duty responsibly, and why some people do not trust that the epistemic duty of policymakers is good enough. It is argued here that in times of crises, we must rely on each other and our interdependence when there is even a small chance that we can hurt each other by being aware of the potential threat of the pandemic and acting in our best interest to protect our health.

What I will focus on in this paper are our expectations in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and our responsibilities in this regard. The crisis may entail changes in institutions, individual and group behaviors, or interpersonal relationships, and in many cases, it entails changes in all these areas. I assume that interdependence and collaboration at all levels of society are crucial to managing a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

I argue strongly that we should act in our best interest to protect our health and the health of others – in times of crisis, everyone should be expected to maintain the highest level of interdependence.

To support the importance of interdependence that depends on expectations, I will use the framework presented in Cristina Bicchieri's work¹ and accept her definition:

Expectations are beliefs about what is going to happen or what should happen; both presuppose a continuity between past and present or future. (Bicchieri 2017: 11)

There is a distinction between empirical expectations that influence our decisions and social expectations that are normative.

“We may have observed how people behave or some trusted source may have told us that people behave in such and such a way. If we have reason to believe that they will continue to act as in the past, we will have formed empirical expectations about their future behavior” (Bicchieri 2017: 12). This could be important for policymakers while creating recommendations for the future behavior of citizens. If they had time to think about empirical expectations about people's behavior, the recommendations during COVID-19 would be more consistent and trustworthy.

Normative social expectations, on the other hand, “express our belief that other people believe (and will continue to believe) that certain behaviors are praiseworthy and should be carried out while others should be avoided”

1 Bicchieri 2017.

(Bicchieri 2017: 12). Normative expectations are connected to individuals and are based on our beliefs and epistemic responsibility in creating those beliefs.

Bicchieri also claims that to change our beliefs, we must accept the possibility that we may be wrong. When we accept that possibility, we become curious and start searching for information – we become epistemically responsible. In the first part of this paper, I will address the importance of epistemic duty. The interdependence between experts and policymakers and their epistemic responsibility is also presented further in this paper.

Epistemic Responsibility in Times Covid-19 Pandemic

First, to define what epistemic responsibility is. “Epistemic responsibility is a set of habits or practices of the mind that people develop through the cultivation of some basic epistemic virtues, such as open-mindedness, epistemic humility, and diligence that help knowers engage in seeking information about themselves, others, and the world that they inhabit (Medina 2013)” (McHguh, Davidson 2020: 174–190).

An individual constructs a particular situation and decides how to act. Once she understands the situation, she forms beliefs and expectations. To understand the situation, an individual becomes curious and begins to search for information. When an individual tries to understand and inform herself, she is being epistemically responsible. Epistemic responsibility is the belief that responsibility may be applied to beliefs.

An epistemically responsible agent desires to have true beliefs...his actions are guided by these desires (Kornblith 1983: 34). Thus, those desires should lead to specialized individuals who have certain expertise. An expert is generally a person with extensive knowledge or skills based on research, experience, or profession and related to a specific field. In the COVID-19 example, a virologist has more knowledge about the virus than an average person. It is important to recognize the experts, but of course, experts may disagree. Let me emphasize that this paper is not about the conflict between experts on COVID-19, but policymakers (the Minister of Health, the Civil Guard, the Prime Minister, etc.) who may not be experts on certain topics but shape the response to the crisis and the mutual trust on this issue by relying on the opinions of (certain) experts. Policymakers bear a particularly heavy epistemic responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic and possible future crises. The epistemic duty and responsibility of experts are to conduct research, test, consult literature and other experts, and share their best knowledge with policymakers who should take appropriate measures to protect life by enacting laws to protect us and taking action to protect us in certain circumstances when they believe our lives may be in danger. Therefore, the design and implementation of public policy should only be based on objective expectations that are important to most people, and that is certainly the protection of health and life. Article 2 of the Human Rights Act also protects the right to life. “This means that nobody, including the government, can try to end your life. However, it also means that

the government should take appropriate measures to safeguard life by making laws to protect us and, in some circumstances, by taking steps to protect you if your life is at risk”.² Although this may be a controversial claim, I will accept it and take the standpoint that government has positive duties, duties to act, to do something, especially when we talk about times of crises and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. I argue that we are all directly responsible for the lives and health of others in these circumstances, and interdependence is defined as the dependence of two or more people on each other within the society and government and to act.

To support that, I accept the following claim:

The greater our sphere of influence, determined by the number of people who are affected by our decisions, the degree to which they are affected, and their vulnerability, the weightier our epistemic responsibilities. It follows from these principles that decision-makers have especially weighty epistemic responsibilities as we confront the COVID-19 pandemic. (Levy, Savulescu 2020: 3)

But how is it possible that some people lose interdependence and trust in the protection provided by policymakers and act irresponsibly? According to Levy and Savulescu:

There is an epistemic condition to action, for only when we understand the nature of our actions and the kind of effects, they are likely to have been we able to exercise control over our behavior. The epistemic condition entails epistemic duties. (Levi, Savulescu 2020: 2)

Individuals thus bear considerable epistemic responsibility for their health and well-being and (perhaps even more so) for the health and well-being of others. The larger our sphere of influence, determined by the number of people affected by our decisions, the greater our epistemic responsibility. Nevertheless, the reasons for the lack of trust in the protection, decisions, and recommendations of policymakers are epistemic. Seeking information through digital media and directing curiosity to experts who do not agree with policymakers but still have a significant space to share their opinions, which is guaranteed by freedom of expression, can also endanger some groups at risk from the COVID-19 virus and destabilize society in a way that individuals suddenly have different expectations and actions. To summarize, in times when there is even the slightest chance of endangering the health of others, this behavior is not epistemically responsible.

(Responsible) Epistemic Duty in Times of Crises

Don Fallis, a Professor of Philosophy and Computer Science at Northeastern University studies how people can acquire knowledge in the social world and is interested in both the positive and negative effects of digital technology on

2 (Article 2: Right to Life | Equality and Human Rights Commission)

our ability to acquire knowledge. Prof. Fallis emphasizes that access to online databases, social media, communication, and collaboration with large numbers of people across large distances can fulfill an epistemic duty. Fallis in his module emphasizes that: “Internet access and digital technologies can also diminish the influence of traditional information gatekeepers, promote belief polarization, and facilitate online deception.”³

In this context, we must consider that when we talk about interdependence and the creation of beliefs and expectations:

Three types of targets in epistemological research must be distinguished; individuals and individual beliefs; groups and group beliefs; and general social practices, social institutions, and systems [...] while individual epistemology primarily deals with the epistemic properties of individual beliefs, social epistemology is concerned with the epistemic properties of social entities and practices. (Prijić Samaržija 2018: 37)

We can conclude that epistemic duty must be performed both at the level of the individual and at the level of the social unit, e.g., policymakers. However, while the epistemic duty of policymakers is fulfilled by protecting objective expectations that are important to most people and by obtaining information from acknowledged experts, mutual agreement, and risk assessment for society, individuals may obtain information from other sources and create beliefs that are inconsistent with the general social policy on the subject. Moreover, by being able to use social media, communicate, and collaborate with a variety of people across great distances, individuals can become part of a group that shares their beliefs. In this case, this group will not follow the recommendations of policymakers, such as the government, which can be dangerous in the context of health and lead to destabilization in society. But in times of uncertainty, when even science is not unanimous, individuals may not have trust in public policies. Even when public health is at stake, some groups consider their beliefs and freedoms superior and seek information that justifies their beliefs while ignoring those that do not. It can be concluded that epistemic duty is questioned here because it is fulfilled with the sole purpose of justifying beliefs, which is unjustifiable behavior in the context of epistemic duty. In the literature, this effect is referred to as confirmation bias. According to Nickerson:

Confirmation bias is the term typically used in psychological literature, connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand. (Nickerson 1998: 175)

It is the most common bias that leads to ignoring information that does not confirm certain beliefs. Furthermore, ignoring information and relying on confirmation of their beliefs can lead people to overestimate themselves and

3 (“The Social Epistemology of Coronavirus.”, n.d.)

This module at Northwestern University focuses on how the pandemic is affecting our ability to acquire knowledge through digital technology and how digital technology is affecting our ability to acquire knowledge about the pandemic.

make “erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence (in topic) robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it” (Kruger, Dunning 1999: 1121).

And at the same time, they attach great importance to their expectations and behavior. Although they may not be aware of that, this is irresponsible fulfillment of epistemic duty.

“The risk of being swayed by untrustworthy information and advice is particularly prominent in the contemporary, hypermediated environment, marked by the growing dominance of digital media. This environment eased the diffusion of expert knowledge and enabled greater public engagement with science, but also brought new challenges in the form of misinformation and public controversies that can undermine trust in expertise (Davies, Hara 2017; Van Dijck, Alinejad 2020). These challenges have a negative effect not only on public trust in experts as such but also on people’s ability to identify trustworthy expert information” (Mihelj, Kondor, Štětka 2022: 293).

We can also recall here Bicchieri and claim that expectations are beliefs about what will happen or what should happen. Some people simply do not believe that they can be infected with the virus or even that the virus does not exist, so they do not expect anything to happen to them, and act accordingly. More than that, they do not accept that the government is ascribed the goal or status function of managing the state, making it difficult for it to fulfill its epistemic obligations. Although this paper assumes that we should be interdependent in the crisis, some do not work in their best interest to protect their health and that of others because they do not adjust their expectations by seeking information from experts and key policymakers, making it harder for everyone to manage the crisis. “For people to be willing to take responsibility to develop the habits necessary for managing a pandemic, they need to trust their government” (Nihlén Fahlquist 2021: 675), but during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was sometimes hard to find consistency in policies which led to the loss of trust in government.

Freedom vs. Health

If we assume that health is a value that every individual holds in high esteem and that as members of society, we expect first and foremost the protection of our lives, the reasons for acting in times of the pandemic for health protection can be accepted as a justification for a particular public policy. We can conclude that it is not possible to justify exceptions to regulations that claim the right of some to make exceptions that endanger the health of individuals. If we put this in a modern context, and the recommendation of the World Health Organization that wearing a medical mask protects the health⁴ we can take an

⁴ *Masks are a key measure to reduce transmission and save lives. Depending on the type, masks can be used for either protection of healthy persons or to prevent onward transmission or both.* (Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): Masks. , n.d.)

example in which one person values her health highly, while another values the freedom not to wear a medical mask in a public (or closed) space because it makes her uncomfortable (and challenges her ideal of freedom). One person expects the other to behave in a mutually interdependent manner that contributes to the preservation of her health, and the other expects understanding in the pursuit of her freedom. From the point of view of consequences, endangering health may have more serious consequences for the well-being of the individual than endangering the right to free choice, i.e., in this case, not wearing a medical mask, and therefore the right to free choice, which consequently may endanger public health, is not justified. The right to life or health is above the right to choose, I claim if someone wants to say that it is the individual's choice whether to put his health at risk. Yes, that can be true if you look at it from a subjective standpoint, but I am arguing here for the standpoint of interdependence, that is, for the implementation of a public policy that cannot be based on anything other than objective expectations that are important to most people, and that is certainly the protection of health and life. On the one hand, the decisions of the individuals who do not want to wear medical masks will affect the number of people who might die from the virus.

The greater our sphere of influence, determined by the number of people who are affected by our decisions, the degree to which they are affected, and their vulnerability, the weightier our epistemic responsibilities. It follows from these principles that decision-makers have especially weighty epistemic responsibilities as we confront the COVID-19 pandemic. Their decisions will affect the number of people who die from the virus. (Levy, Savulescu 2020: 3)

However, the COVID-19 policy seeks to use the coercive power of government to impose or legitimize one set of fundamental values or norms over a competing set (or sets) of values or norms, and of course, the question of the morality of such a policy arises. To answer that question, we need to raise another one: what is a government's primary responsibility?

The primary responsibility of governments is to create a balance between individual values and rights, on one hand, and the health of the population, on the other. The responsibility of governments is connected to individual responsibility through the values of trust and solidarity. (Nihlén Fahlquist 2021: 675)

But there is also a question of the vulnerable people we protect. Who exactly is vulnerable if we acknowledge the fact that some people were hurt (a significant number of examinations and diagnostic procedures were canceled or postponed) while protecting others? Instead of arguing these questions, I will introduce research titled "Moralizing the COVID-19 Pandemic: Self-Interest Predicts Moral Condemnation of Other's Compliance, Distancing, and Vaccination" (Bor, Jørgensen, Lindholt, Petersen 2023: 257–279) that has been conducted through online surveys from eight countries (Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The

study concludes that large majorities believe it is justified to condemn those who do not keep their distance from others in public and that about half of the respondents blame ordinary citizens for the severity of the pandemic. The most important predictors of condemnation are behavioral change and personal concern, while institutional trust and social distrust also play important but less consistent roles. Research shows that both moralizing, and condemnation of vaccination and general compliance are best predicted by self-interested considerations. We can conclude that the basis of interdependence is – and this is kind of ironic – self-interested considerations. One must believe that it is in his best interest to act interdependent.

Consequences of Ignoring the Interdependence

The paper repeatedly emphasized interdependence at all levels, and one can get the impression that the interdependence and responsibility of policymakers and public services were not sufficient. Mutual trust was emphasized, as well as the assumption that we expect the government to protect our lives first and foremost in times of COVID-19 pandemic, also from the point of view of interdependence, that is, for the implementation of a public policy that cannot be based on anything other than objective expectations that are important to most people, and that is certainly the protection of health and life. Since we are directly responsible for the lives and health of others in these circumstances, interdependence is defined here as a dependence of two or more people (and the system as a whole) within society. Since the pandemic began, more than six million people have died from the COVID-19 virus. As much as many of us wish we could put the pandemic behind us, at the end of August this year we reached the devastating milestone of one million deaths in 2022 alone.⁵ Not wearing a medical mask nowadays still means that we probably deal with people every day who have the COVID-19 virus and do not prevent them from spreading the disease. Even if one has respiratory symptoms like coughing or sneezing, it makes sense to wear a mask: you could have an undiagnosed COVID-19 virus, and by wearing a mask you are protecting people around you from the virus. Let us remember that the World Health Organization advises that medical masks can be a key measure for reducing transmission and saving lives. Even if you have a bad cold or flu, it's worth protecting those around you – for people with weak immune systems, these illnesses can still take a toll. What happens when interdependence fails is illustrated by the recent case in Croatia. In August 2002, Croatian journalist Vladimir Matijanić died of pulmonary edema secondary to myocarditis and bilateral pneumonia. The main cause of death was the COVID-19 virus. It is impossible to say with certainty how Matijanić became infected with the COVID-19 virus, but it cannot be ruled out that it happened due to not wearing a medical mask (others, himself) and his weak immune system was compromised. What we do know,

5 (Five Reasons to Wear a Mask Even If You Don't Have to. , n.d.)

however, is that Matijanić sought help from doctors in Split from Tuesday to Friday. During those four days, not only was he not hospitalized, but he was also not even properly medically examined. Although Matijanić and his partner called an ambulance a dozen times asking to take him to the hospital, this never happened. Had Matijanić been properly examined and hospitalized at an early stage of the disease based on the findings and diagnosis, as he should have been, he would have had a chance to survive. Moreover, two days before his death, Matijanić was told that there was a lack of medication in Croatia to prevent the more serious consequences of the COVID-19 virus, which is administered to patients like him. This case was all over the media and there is a frightening possibility that this case from Croatia is not the only one in which individuals and systems have failed in their epistemic responsibility and interdependent behavior.

Conclusion

The importance of interdependence and epistemic responsibility of individuals within a society and the epistemic responsibility of policymakers were emphasized in this paper. Epistemic responsibility is every attempt of a person to understand and inform herself to create certain beliefs. This is pointed out in this text because we found ourselves in an unexpected and specific situation facing the COVID-19 pandemic which we wanted to understand. It was a situation that no one predicted, and we all wanted to know more about it. In this case, we relied on acknowledged experts and policymakers. The epistemic duty and responsibility of experts are to conduct research, test, consult literature and other experts, and share their best knowledge with policymakers should take appropriate measures to protect life by enacting laws to protect us and taking action to protect us in certain circumstances when they believe our lives may be in danger. Policymakers bear a particularly heavy epistemic responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic and possible future crises. The standpoint that government has positive duties, duties to act, especially in times of crises and the COVID-19 pandemic has been presented and accepted which led to the conclusion that the epistemic duty of policymakers is fulfilled by protecting objective expectations that are important to most people and by obtaining information from acknowledged experts, mutual agreement, and risk assessment for society. The primary responsibility of governments is to create a balance between individual values and rights, on the one hand, and the health of the population, on the other. The basis of interdependence is based on self-interested considerations which means that one must believe that it is in his best interest to act interdependent. Since we are all directly responsible for the lives and health of others in times of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises that may happen to us, in times of crisis, everyone should be expected to maintain the highest level of interdependence.

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Nikolina Smiljanić

Važnost međuzavisnosti i odgovornog epistemičkog ponašanja tokom kriza

Sažetak

Nedavno smo se našli u neočekivanoj i specifičnoj situaciji suočavajući se s pandemijom COVID-19 koju smo hteli razumeti. Bila je to situacija koju niko nije predvidio, a svi smo hteli znati više o tome. Pandemija COVID-19 značajno je uticala na naše živote i naglasila važnost ponašanja na način koji je međusobno zavisna, jer smo izravno odgovorni za živote i zdravlje drugih u ovakvim okolnostima. Ovaj rad naglašava važnost međuzavisnosti i epistemičke odgovornosti pojedinaca unutar društva i kreatora politika koji snose posebno tešku epistemičku odgovornost tokom pandemije COVID-19 i mogućih budućih kriza.

Ključne reči: međuzavisnost, odgovorno epistemičko ponašanje, epistemičke dužnosti, epistemička odgovornost, verovanja