



Attitudes to the Global Pandemic from the Standpoint of Moral Philosophy

Bilal Kuşpınar

Prof. Bilal Kuşpınar

Prof. Bilal Kuşpınar received his B.A. in theology from Selçuk University, Konya, his M.A. in philosophy, logic and history of science from the Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, his first Ph.D. in the history of Islamic philosophy from Selçuk University, and his second Ph.D. in philosophy and mysticism from McGill University, Canada. His research investigates into various philosophical and mystical traditions of Islamic civilization. He taught at several universities, including Selçuk University, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, and Concordia and McGill Universities, Montreal, and Ahlia University, Bahrain. He has published many articles and books in his field. Among his books are: *The Lamp of Mysteries: A Commentary on the Light-Verse of the Qur'an*. (Oxford, 2011) *Ismā'īl Ankaravī on the Illuminative Philosophy*. (Kuala Lumpur, 1996). *Ibn Sina'da Bilgi Teorisi (Avicenna's Theory of Knowledge)*. (Istanbul 2001). Ed. *Mevlana ve İslam*. He is a member of the editorial board and international advisory committee of several academic journals in his field. While he was working as Professor of the history of Philosophy and the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, he was appointed in October 2019 as Counselor for Social and Religious Affairs, Turkish Embassy, Washington, D.C.

Attitudes to the Global Pandemic from the Standpoint of Moral Philosophy¹

Bilal Kuşpınar

Presidency of Religious Affairs

bilal.kuspinar@diyanet.gov.tr

Abstract

There can be little doubt that scholars of the social sciences and humanities, as well as economists, will continue to debate for a long-time severe consequences and adverse effects of the Coronavirus epidemic on individuals as well as societies. This invisible and apparently invincible particle has mobilized the energies and expertise of natural scientists and health experts, while rendering world leaders helpless and desperate in the face of its devastating impact on social and economic life. The sudden appearance and rapid spread of this fatal virus has forced all nations to re-arrange and readjust their social and economic policies to conform with the dictates of *a new normal*. As individuals and societies struggle to conduct their daily affairs in the newly imposed conditions of the Coronavirus pandemic, they face tremendous challenges and difficulties in coping, on the one hand, with necessary and often severe restrictions and, on the other, with the fear and anxiety of uncertainty. Depending on their perception and understanding of this devastating *new normal*, people, organizations and societies display various attitudes and behaviors in this new situation. Some of them remain confident, strong and forward-looking, since they view this crisis as a test or a trial, which, they believe, can be overcome with perseverance. Others, however, see themselves as helpless victims, and the pandemic as a calamity, a punishment or even as “End Times”, the advent of which, they fear, is unstoppable and uncontrollable. These different perceptions, behaviors and attitudes as exhibited by people in the course of the pandemic, as well as the possible consequences of these perceptions, behaviors and attitudes, will be evaluated in this paper from the standpoint of moral philosophy.

Keywords

Categorical imperative, COVID-19, end of time, ethics, herd immunity, new normalcy, pandemic, philosophy, prophecy, punishment, religion, self-isolation, science, spirituality, test, virtue

¹ This study is a translation and updated version of the paper previously published in the book titled “Küresel Salgının Anatomisi: İnsan ve Toplumun Geleceği” by TÜBA in June 2020.

Introduction

Psychological, sociological and economic problems created by the Coronavirus epidemic, along with its terrible consequences, have already begun to appear at various forms and degrees throughout the world. It is clear that even if its spread is contained by an effective vaccine in the near future, its aftershocks will likely continue to be felt by many nations across the globe for a long time to come. At this early stage it is not possible to determine, in exact terms, the short and long-term, micro and macro level, physical and immaterial impacts of this virus in any given country with the probable exception of the number of persons infected and deaths, which have been regularly tabulated, though with imperfect accuracy, by several organizations.

There is much discussion about the negative effects of the virus, especially its devastating impact on economic and social life, ranging from massive unemployment to the weakening of the social fabric. It is very likely that many studies to be carried out in the natural and health sciences, as well as in the social sciences and humanities, will in future devote a separate chapter to the Coronavirus. Historians may well divide their works into two distinct periods: prior- and post-Coronavirus.

It is appropriate at this point to ask if the novel Coronavirus has ever done any good to anybody or, stated in more general terms, if it has made, or will make in the future, any *positive* impact on any society. Such a question, though it may sound strange and even appalling to many people, ought to be given serious thought and attention for several substantial reasons, which will be discussed in this paper. This question, in the first place, is addressed primarily to theologians and philosophers, particularly moral philosophers. Whatever the case, the effects of this Coronavirus epidemic, be they positive or negative, depend upon perceptions of the virus itself. Its possible impacts, in other words, will differ from one individual to another and from one nation to another, according to their respective worldviews, and especially their understanding of truth, the world, human beings themselves and life.

This essay approaches the topic mainly from the viewpoint of moral philosophy. As morality and religion are closely intertwined and complementary fields, it will first examine the views, opinions and comments of religious leaders and theologians concerning the virus in summary form.

Religious Leaders' Approaches to the COVID-19

The representatives of the major monotheistic religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—residing in the United States of America have expressed diverse opinions on the Coronavirus outbreak and its “meaning.” Not only are there noticeable differences among the opinions of the representatives of these three religious traditions. There are radical disagreements among the leaders of each of them. To make compelling arguments for the validity of their positions on the causes of and the reasons for the Coronavirus epidemic, mainstream religious leaders, who usually speak on behalf of their community, invoke their respective Scriptures, commentaries and other authoritative sources inherited from their historical and cultural legacies and re-interpret them in accordance with their individual reasoning in the light of contemporary circumstances.

By recalling certain verses of the Old Testament (e.g. Exodus 15:26), some Rabbis, for instance, have proclaimed that God has sent plagues and epidemics such as the current one as a divine punishment for the sins committed by people and hence His mercy and forgiveness should be sought. They have further declared that, as explained in the Talmud and its commentaries, exactly as in the past, today one should take all the required precautionary measures and strictly observe the rules and regulations stipulated by state authorities. In other words, today's Coronavirus outbreak, in the eyes of these Jewish leaders, is definitely a punishment from God who has deliberately sent it to punish mankind's misdeeds or transgressions. They are convinced that the crisis can be averted provided people implore God for Forgiveness and that it can be contained if all the necessary precautions and measures are duly implemented and followed. In this way, they have appealed to their communities to ask for the forgiveness and mercy of God and abide by the instructions and restrictions of the authorities in order to protect themselves from infection. Other influential Jewish leaders, however, have stated that since the time of Moses and Aaron, as recorded in historical Talmudic sources, the Jewish community has encountered many ordeals, disasters, plagues and hardships. These should not be viewed as Divine punishment, but rather as a warning. And for the sake of safety, these leaders have further suggested, synagogues should be closed and congregational rituals and services be suspended under current circumstances. Jewish history, after all, records several similar instances. Some other representatives of Judaism have approached the pandemic from the viewpoint of natural and health sciences and thus refrained from associating it with God. I have yet to encounter any scholarly published work or article that encompasses the full diversity of Jewish views and perspectives on the current crisis (Gilad, 2020).

The publicly expressed views of Christian religious leaders and theologians to the novel Coronavirus epidemic are quite similar to those of their Jewish counterparts. Exactly as in the case of Judaism, in Christianity, too, at least three distinct and identifiable groups express sharply differing views on the epidemic. One group proclaims that the virus is a manifestation of God's wrath and His punishment for sinners; another group believes it to be a warning and an admonition from God; the third group argues that since God is good and only good may proceed from Him, no such evil as the current virus, therefore, can ever emanate from Him nor even be linked with Him in any way. Though the official statement of the Vatican, the center of the Roman Catholic Church, explicitly states that "Coronavirus is not God's punishment, but our own self-punishment" there are others within the establishment those who appear to believe or state quite the opposite. The Pope, in his personal discourses gives the impression that he is more concerned with the social and economic consequences of the virus (Doody, 2020).

Perhaps the most interesting view of the virus emanating from self-declared Christians, appears have been expressed in a virtual book entitled *The Coronavirus in Biblical Prophecy*. In this unprinted work, the author asserts that the spread of the Coronavirus across the globe, as foreshadowed by some of the verses of the Bible (e.g. Matthew 24:7), is a conspicuous sign of God's 'punishment for a sinful world.' The author further adds to his claim by asserting that "the predictions of Jesus are once again proven to be accurate." (DeJesus, 2020; Kettley, 2020) Moreover, a prominent Evangelical holds that the Coronavirus is "a death angel sent by God to purge many sins" and "may be moving right now across the planet." It has originated in China, he proclaims, because that country's "godless communist government persecutes Christians and forces abortions" (Brown, 2020).

On the other hand, most Christian clergymen have flatly rejected these provocative positions and vehemently criticized the plausibility and appropriateness of Jesus' alleged predictions within the context of the current pandemic. They have also strongly repudiated the views expressed by certain religious leaders who believe the virus to be a means of divine punishment, and instead reiterated the commonly-circulated speculative theory that it must have emerged either as a result of carelessness or negligence among certain scientists who had been experimenting with this virus in laboratories located in the city of Wuhan, or because of human consumption of wild animals, mainly bats. Therefore, God, they have further promulgated, need not send a virus in order to inflict punishment on anyone or any nation in the world. Besides, God is "a Good God" and as such cannot be associated or cooperated in anything evil, which can only be attributed to the work of Satan (Scanlon, 2020).

In addition to the views enunciated by the Christian religious leaders on the subject of the Coronavirus, another striking opinion has been expressed by staunch Christian theologian Dr. Mark Hitchcock, whose yet unpublished work, thanks to his frequent interviews on media, has already captured the

attention of many members of his faith community in the United States. In introducing and advertising his work, *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse*, Dr. Hitchcock poses a crucial question, “The Coronavirus Pandemic, A Sign of End Times?” and then attempts to muster convincing arguments through his own reading of certain passages from the Bible of an apocalyptic nature to assert that the current outbreak reflects Biblical prophecies (Hitchcock, 2020). This kind of *theological* interpretation can and must be evaluated from the vantage point of moral philosophy.

One of the implications of Dr. Hitchcock’s assertion is that the new pandemic should be seen as the herald or portent of Jesus’ imminent return or “second coming.” In some Christian religious circles, particularly on virtual platforms and in social media, articles, short and long articles, lectures and discussions have been published making similar predictions and prophecies, one of which, for instance, is entitled: “COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus: God’s Blessing or Satan’s Curse?” (Macneil, 2020)

By posing an ironical question, “Where is God in a pandemic?” and answering, “We don’t know,” a small group of Christian theologians, on the other hand, seems to have adopted a rather agnostic attitude. For, in their view, the hardships and grief brought about by natural disasters and diseases, which may be termed “*natural suffering*,” are far different from the pains and trials brought about by the immoral actions and evildoings of people, which may be called *moral-evil suffering*. For this reason, illnesses, diseases and pandemics, such as the Coronavirus, they suggest, should be seen as a test of one’s faith, patience and perseverance (Martin, 2020).

The perceptions and expositions of Muslim preachers and scholars on the Coronavirus epidemic appear, in terms of diversity and heterogeneity, to parallel those of Jewish and Christian leaders. Like their Jewish and Christian counterparts, Muslim religious authorities likewise display widely differing positions. Some strongly believe that of His own will God has purposely sent it as a punishment for His enemies, oppressors, transgressors, their allies and followers (US News, 2020). Others hold that the Coronavirus epidemic is a divine punishment intended to punish mankind because of its sinful acts and misdeeds. People should therefore return immediately to God by repenting for their evildoings and sins (Ali, 2020).

Still other Muslim religious scholars go farther still, in sermons in which they characterize the Coronavirus as “a soldier of God, sent to punish both the West and Muslims” because of their disobedience to Him. Other Muslim divines specify that the deadly virus erupted in China, because of God’s decision to punish the Chinese for their inhuman treatment and persecution of Uighur Muslims. To make a convincing case they cite Scriptural references and prophetic stories that they relate to the present context, while assuring their audience that in the past God also sent similar chastisements in various forms to the people who had disobeyed Him. “A mosquito”, for instance, He sent “to

kill Nimrod,” and “the ten plagues He unleashed to punish the Egyptians.” So, this deadly virus, like other past plagues, is a stern warning from God to humanity. The only solution, they claim, is to return to God and obey Him (Cohen, 2020).

The above views, drawn from sermons of a small number of Muslim clerics, all available on the internet, should better be seen as the reflection of the position of a very small group, which seems to have received little or no support or backing from the Muslim world’s most influential religious leaders and spiritual representatives. Their narrow and radical opinions, on the contrary, have been severely criticized and categorically rejected by many, if not most, traditional Muslim scholars with substantial rational arguments, as well as persuasive textual evidence derived from the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions known as the Sunna.

Based on their in-depth analysis and interpretation of these two primary sources, a majority of Muslim intellectuals and scholars have advanced a more plausible, justifiable and consistent position towards the issue of the Coronavirus, which in turn has been relatively well accepted and appreciated by most of their coreligionists. Accordingly, today’s pandemic, COVID-19, like many other diseases and plagues in the past, must be viewed not as a punishment or as the wrath of God, but a sign, an indication, a trial and a lesson from Him. In other words, in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of Muslim religious leaders, to characterize the occurrence of this present pandemics and any other calamities as a punishment deliberately inflicted by God upon humanity would be not only a gross error, but also a baseless, if not blasphemous, allegation against God. Such a characterization would inadvertently trespass the boundaries of the human domain, step into the realm of God and assume the Latter’s role and prerogatives, thereby acting on His behalf and speaking in His Name. Or, to say the least, to declare that the current outbreak is a punishment from God implicitly suggests foreknowledge of God’s intention and will.

Moreover, argue Islam’s mainstream scholars, to attribute the emergence of diseases and pandemics to a certain group of people or a nation, linking and correlating them with their sins, is as inconceivable as it is unjustifiable. For, as recorded in many religious Scriptures, Prophets, first and foremost the chosen people and messengers of God, were those who faced and experienced the most intense of hardships. When they encountered these difficulties and tribulations, they accepted them not as God’s punishment, but rather as a test and a trial from Him and thus, without falling into despair, put their trust in Him and endured them with fortitude and perseverance, while encouraging their communities to take all necessary precautions and measures and remain faithful and hopeful. Besides, “a thing which appears bad or evil may turn good in the end,” (Qur’an, *al-Baqara* 2:216) and “along with every difficulty there is ease and after every hardship, indeed there is comfort;” (Qur’an *al-Inshirah* 94: 5-6) “there is no disease that God has created, except that He has

also created its cure and treatment.” (Hadith). In this case, then, the human being, as he has done in the case of other diseases, is expected to work hard and search for the cure. After all, “human being can only obtain what he strives for.” (Qur’an *al-Najm* 53:39) (Kuşpınar, 2020a; 2020b; Görmez, 2020; Haque, 2020).

Thus far we have presented a summary of the views and perceptions of the representatives of the three great religious traditions, whose Scriptural roots are grounded in Divine revelation and whose genealogical history begins with their first common ancestor, Prophet Adam and converged with their common father, Prophet Abraham. At his specific juncture, there are two crucial observations to be made.

First, throughout history, not only the members of the three monotheistic religions, but also the members of all existing world religious traditions have faced, from time to time, hardships, difficulties and tribulations due to a number of unfortunate conditions, such as wars, forced migrations and exile. However, based on our investigation, we can state with relative certainty that at no time in human history have all of these religious traditions ever faced, together and simultaneously, a mortal threat as pervasive as that posed by the Coronavirus epidemic.

World history does not record if any similar crisis of such intense severity ever before befell all these religious communities at the same time and affected, even paralyzed, them all simultaneously, on such a large scale. This has happened to such an extent that without exception the leaders of all religious communities have found themselves in an awkward and helpless situation, in a state of impasse where they have been coerced or obliged to submit to the directives of their respective state authorities. In adhering to and complying with these instructions, religious leaders have never questioned nor doubted their compatibility with the beliefs, values, rituals and practices of their religious traditions, for the Coronavirus crisis has left them, put in existential terms, in an *either/ or* state: *to be or not to be*, survival or death. Either abide by the rules and preserve and ensure the continuity of their religious beliefs and practices, along with their communities, or disregard and disobey them and face the unpredictable but hazardous consequences.

Despite the forced closure of their houses of worship, interruption of congregational prayers and other ceremonial services, they had to accept the *new normal*, raising little or no objection. In such extraordinary and potentially life-threatening conditions, the question for all the religious leaders has been an existential one, i.e. what must be done in order to stay alive and to keep the members of their communities and congregations alive. Their struggle, therefore, has been to ensure full compliance with the rules and restrictions that have been imposed on them by governments and public health authorities, and at the same time provide a reasonable and convincing explanation of the outbreak, its meaning, and the reason and rationale for its occurrence. How

and why did it happen? Where does God stand in relation to it? Is it God-sent or human made? How long will it last? In answering these questions, every word the religious leaders utter and every message they convey to their respective communities must as expected, be supported and justified by their religious teachings and at the same time be consistent with the directives of state authorities. Given these unavoidable conditions, therefore, all religious leaders have been compelled to re-read carefully their respective religious sources, sacred texts and commentaries, and re-interpret them in the context of this *new normal*.

Second, how the chief representatives of each religious tradition approach and interpret the pandemic from the vantage point of their respective spiritual and moral teachings, all the while respecting the explanations of state and scientific authorities. To do so has proven to be a source of anxiety and effort as they mobilize their spiritual powers and undertake the necessary intellectual effort to account for the sudden appearance and rapid spread of the virus in a *theologically-scripturally justifiable and acceptable, rationally and scientifically intelligible and persuasive* manner.

These crucial questions have reminded us, if not sparked anew, the ancient and acrimonious debate between science and religion witnessed in the Western world during the late Middle Ages, when almost no instance of such debate had taken place in the Muslim world. Similar disputes on the presumably existing conflict between science and religion have once again come to the fore, however, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic now sweeping the globe. These time-consuming and intellectually unproductive debates have not only negatively impacted and even occasionally confused perceptions of the pandemic, but also gravely complicated the smooth adjustment of peoples' lives to the *new normal*. For neither science nor scientific theory, but moral norms and values, govern and shape the life of a society: moral norms and values that are already well established, widely accepted and widely regarded as universal.

What is naturally expected from a scientist is that s/he focus on finding out *what* the novel Coronavirus is, *what is the possible cause* of its occurrence, *how* it is communicated, and the search for an effective cure or vaccine. From a theologian or a religious scholar it is anticipated that, in accordance with the information provided by science, s/he offers moral support for people by means of authentic examples from the historical sources of her/his/religious tradition, urges them to remain vigilant, to protect their lives, their intelligence, their spirits and property, while inviting them to cooperate fully with others, especially health workers and state authorities, in order to overcome or, at least alleviate, the adverse effects of the pandemic. In this spirit of collaboration, scientists continue their search for a cure, medical doctors care for their patients, and religious leaders guide members of their respective congregations and maintain high moral.

If this is done, these professionals can contribute significantly to maintaining and sustaining a physically healthy and morally-spiritually strong society. Incidentally, this kind of close and effective cooperation between scientists and religious scholars, which is necessary in any given country, is most desirable if implemented globally and internationally, among governments, particularly as they are all fighting against a single mortal threat. Some countries, Turkey among them, have already displayed such cooperation by supply medical equipment to needy countries.

But, to return to our subject, the conflict previously discussed is not necessarily one between science and religion, but rather between representatives of science or scientists and representatives of religion or, more specifically, between the attitudes and perceptions of scientists and those of religious leaders. As such, this crucial issue, involving as it does the behaviours and actions of both groups, must be evaluated from the viewpoint of professional ethics in general and of moral philosophy in particular.

Psychological Implications of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Leaving aside for the time being the relative positions of religious representatives and those of scientists, what has been the psychological impact upon and its implications for the lives and livelihoods of individuals? As a result of the strict implementation of the restrictions imposed by the state authorities to prevent the spread of the virus, many businesses, with the exception of those shops supplying basic needs, such as markets, groceries and pharmacies, etc., have been forced to close their doors. Millions of people all over the world have lost their jobs and, despite some financial aid from government, have had to cope with a full-fledged economic crisis. Another badly affected group has been youth. Previously accustomed an active social life, restrictions have forced them to lead a lonely, passive life indoors, which has in turn caused immense stress and anxiety. Sizeable numbers of young people, due to long periods of self-isolation, have turned to unhealthy and often dangerous ways to seek relief and comfort. Some turned addictive drugs, opium, tranquilizers and intoxicating beverages while still some others, unable to bear their suffering any longer, terminated their lives.

Among these are the emergency ward physician who, working eighteen hour days in a New York hospital, witnessed so many deaths and so much suffering that she became extremely disturbed and, shortly thereafter, died of self-inflicted wounds; a German finance minister who, overcome by concern about economic distress resulting from the pandemic, took his own life; a British youth who, gravely “distressed by social distancing measures,” took his life; an Italian nurse who, fearing that she had contaminated others, ended her life (Bach, 2020).

In addition to the actual physical death-toll, there will surely continue to be, in the future, other types of deaths, losses, and emotional and physical damage, caused not only by the Coronavirus epidemic, but primarily because of its psychological factors, such as fear, anxiety, stress, worry, pessimism, loneliness. These psychological factors may well lead to mental disturbances, illnesses and even death, which can be designated as resulting from despair. One of the most adverse effects of the self-isolation measures necessitated to combat the pandemic, has been its impact upon public and private behaviour.

Because of the lengthy period of self-isolation, people appear to have gradually and inadvertently adopted certain careless habits and thoughtless lifestyles, acting in a less thoughtful and more arbitrary manner. They even have started engaging in certain abnormal actions that they generally avoid displaying in public life. Habits and practices have become inverted; night for some has become day, and vice-versa.

The Global Pandemic and Its Moral Implications

“How should we perceive the Coronavirus outbreak?” This was the pivotal question to which we obtained responses from representatives of the major monotheistic religious traditions. Now along the same lines, we must reconsider some, if not all, of the implications of the outbreak of the pandemic. For this unforeseeable and yet somehow predictable predicament has made it possible to examine and test the humanity’s achievements in many areas.

It has certainly provided an excellent occasion for us to carry out a series of tests: *firstly*, medical, to determine the extent of humanity’s achievements in the field of medicine and health sciences; *secondly*, a test of political will, to assess the positions and resolutions of the state authorities and politicians in taking decisions to confront and manage the pandemic; *thirdly*, an ethical test, to examine the consistency or inconsistency of people’s behaviour in dealing with the impact and consequences of this virus; *fourthly*, a psychological, spiritual or a test of faith--all of which can conveniently be summed up under the heading of *a test of spirituality*--to measure people’s strength in facing and enduring the hardships caused by the pandemic. All of these tests and trials will most likely continue for some time to come.

During these critical days, as we are now witnessing, the moral values and judgements of many nations have been subjected to a serious test as well. To be more precise, while fighting this tiny and invisible, yet thus far invincible, particle, all nations, all governments and all countries, from the poorest to the wealthiest, from the least developed to the most advanced, have without exception knelt down before it. Each one now appears to be suggesting its own view of what is right and what is wrong, what is valid and invalid, what is useful and what is harmful, displaying a wide range of opinions and diverse attitudes, all of which need to be examined from the standpoint of ethical philosophy

in order to see how consistent they might—or might not—be with universal moral values. Once more all their choices and preferences, all their decisions and judgements, will probably continue to be discussed for quite a long time. Were they right, accurate and consistent from the point of view of human rights? Since the question—especially for many “developed” nations was not simply restricted to “what we should do in order to fight against this virus and prevent its spread,” but, extended to “which should we choose, to save lives or to keep the economy alive and active”—their choices and decisions have become all the more important. In other words, the pandemic has put some nations’ and their political leaders’ behaviour in handling and managing the crisis and its aftershocks to a profound moral test. In the United States, for instance, a state governor seems to have suggested that “instead of shutting down economic activity, people over 70 should sacrifice themselves for the sake of their country.” (Authers, 2020) which raises the question: how acceptable is it to even consider such an idea, let alone enunciate such a proposition?

There can be little doubt that the Coronavirus epidemic has, for some—to use philosophical terminology—an existential question, a question of survival, i.e. that of the human species, while it impelled others to make the essential decision to keep the existing capitalist system functioning at any cost. Some young people, on the other hand, have adopted careless attitude to the new virus and begun circulating publicly, on social media, bizarre declarations, “If I get corona, I get corona,” and “nothing will happen to me.” Such irresponsible behaviour on the part of young people must be questioned, again, from the viewpoint of moral philosophy. For every action a human performs and every attitude s/he exhibits, whether be it in a normal condition or in a fraught situation such as this, will definitely have a positive or negative reaction or outcome. If we look at it from a Kantian perspective, irrespective of our circumstances, we should behave and act in such a manner that our actions and behaviour conform to a universal *formal* moral rule upon which all can agree. That is to say, that a given behaviour or act, regardless of where and how it takes place, should be valid and acceptable to all as a certain necessary rule or, in Kant’s own terms, a *categorical imperative* (Humphreys, 2020). No one in this sense should display attitudes that are subjective and arbitrary, nor should s/he display contradictory and inconsistent behaviour. Even in most difficult times and dire circumstances, as in the current Coronavirus pandemic, everyone should follow and respect the same moral instruction and the same moral rule. There should hence be no leeway at all for the application of exceptional rules, nor for the acceptance of any exceptional actions.

Another vital issue is the necessity for all segments and strata of a given society to act in a spirit of solidarity. For the state authorities to make correct and timely decisions, all responsible and competent people, from scientific experts to politicians, whether in power or in opposition, are expected to pool their efforts and work together as a team, so that common people, i.e. the ruled, can cooperate and respect policy decisions without falling into despair.

Fighting the Coronavirus and preventing its spread must be the overarching goal, ahead of all other interests and concerns. To achieve this prime goal all efforts to be exerted, all methods to be employed, all measures and decisions to be taken require first and foremost the involvement and participation of all. In such a case, every individual, every group and every segment of a society is expected to behave according to universally accepted moral principles and norms so that everyone's actions be coherent and accepted by all as a universal moral rule, as a *categorical imperative*.

Pandemic, Religion and Morality

One crucial question remains: what are the essential or basic needs of a human being? As a result of the enforced restrictions, in most countries around the world, all shops and businesses were immediately closed by state authorities except for markets which supply foods, meats, vegetables, drinks, as well as pharmacies. However, in one of his weekly press conferences the President of the United States of America made a surprising public announcement, declaring that all houses of worship, synagogues, churches and mosques should be re-opened, as they are “essential places that provide essential services.” He even went ordered state governors to immediately open houses of worships because “America needs more prayer, not less.”

Muslims, though they can by all means perform daily prayers at home, are required to offer Friday and annual feast-day prayers in congregation at mosques. Jews, in like manner, perform congregational prayers in synagogues on Saturdays, while Christians perform theirs in churches on Sundays. Yet despite the importance of congregational prayers, virtually all the leaders of these three religious traditions, having firmly re-affirmed the fundamental teachings, of their respective holy Scriptures that “human life is sacred and inviolable and hence it must be protected under all circumstances,” had no option, in the light of these increasingly trying circumstances, but to close down all their churches, synagogues and mosques in order to protect the lives of the members of their respective communities. This being the case, then, one would argue how plausible and justifiable it was, in terms of morality and political ethics, for a political leader to issue an order, with no backing from health experts, stating that worship is essential, more prayer is needed and therefore all houses of worship must be re-opened? Could there be a theological and/or judicial or moral justification for such an order? Which authorities, furthermore, had been consulted prior to taking such an important decision? Has this matter ever been brought to the attention of the representatives of religious traditions and their professional opinions been sought? All these and other similar questions fully warrant being discussed from the viewpoint of moral philosophy. It must be further noted that this particular presidential pronouncement appears to have been issued, as reported in the news, in reaction to the attitudes of some state governors who, while keeping houses of worship closed, allowed “liquor stores and abortion clinics” (Daily Post,

2020) to open as they were deemed “essential.” By issuing such a decree, which has received almost no support from religious leaders and was not even implemented immediately by state governors, the American President appears to have been acting on presumable good will, and “corrected the injustice,” as he argued, to declare “houses of worship essential” (Daily Post, 2020).

There remain other serious questions and issues that should be subjected to critical examination from an ethical standpoint. For instance, how is it *rationally* explicable and *morally* defensible to justify the indifferent and selfish attitudes of those who deliberately disobey, or neglect to obey, the vitally important disease control directives and restrictions issued by state authorities compared with the cautious and respectful attitudes of those who not only meticulously observe the regulations themselves, but also advise others to follow these directives and restrictions? The positions, initiatives and actions taken by law-abiding individuals against the scofflaws, including overlooking, ignoring, warning, complaining and reporting to authorities, should also be closely investigated from an ethical perspective, for each of these behaviours and attitudes carries an implication—even multiple implications—for society at large. All these responses must therefore be carefully scrutinized and closely studied through the prism of both moral philosophy and universal human values.

When we approach the issue strictly from the vantage point of physicians, we encounter another seemingly paradoxical, and even bizarre, situation. Medical doctors, having devoted their entire lives to saving lives in strict compliance with their Hippocratic oath, appear to have been left to face an inescapable dilemma. Due to shortages or lack of sufficient intensive care units, devices, tools, etc., has forced them to choose between patients infected with the virus. Inevitably, and morally most troubling, they must decide—and morally justify their decision—the life or death of their patients, those who will be given priority treatment, and those who will be left aside. Should they treat relatively young patients and neglect older ones, assuming that the former, because of their physical and biological strength and immune resistance, can be treated more effectively and are more likely to recover than the latter? No doctor would ever wish to find him or herself in such a state of limbo, a state that has been forced upon him or her by inevitable and dire circumstances. In the light of medical and professional ethics, such a situation is impossible to accept. Such forced preferential attitudes, actions and decisions, all of which pose grave consequences for a society, and which somehow reflect the positions of utilitarian moral philosophers, need to be investigated in their own context and also in a broader context of philosophy and sociology. Even should we adopt the view of utilitarian philosophers temporarily as a worldview and tolerate the sacrifice or loss of certain people in pandemic conditions for the sake of preserving the lives of the majority—opting to prioritize the interests of the majority—we can still dispute the acceptability of such a position from the standpoint of universal moral principles and values.

During these critical days we have witnessed another similar practice drawn from philosophical utilitarianism being adopted by a certain state authority in a European country, that is, the United Kingdom. The chief adviser to the Britain's Prime Minister, arguing utilitarian motives designed to protect the economy suggested, instead of enforcing restrictions to impede the spread of the virus, that a policy known as "herd immunity" be applied throughout the country. Under this policy, people are left free to be exposed to the virus so that as many people as possible will fall ill thereby producing immunity on a large scale. The real intention behind such a policy, not explicitly articulated but implicitly indicated by the adviser, is to protect the economy at any cost by keeping all businesses operating and letting all routine social activities continue, as if nothing were happening. When we think of unforeseeable and potentially catastrophic consequences of such a "policy", which might better be termed "gambling", we quickly realize that even entertaining such an idea, let alone implementing it, is fraught with intractable ethical problems. That is why the chief adviser, in the face of harsh criticism that led to a nationwide uproar, immediately disavowed it (Authers, 2020). But what is truly inconceivable—bizarre even—is the fact that the notion of sacrificing human life for the sake of protecting the economy has been entertained in a self-styled modern developed country, one which claims to be a defender of human rights.

Some countries—Turkey, for example—witnessed the implementation of diametrically opposed policies, geared to protecting as many lives as possible. One of these, which were taken upon the recommendation of a scientific advisory committee, was designed to protect the country's elder citizens. Those 65 and older faced strict restrictions, such as being confined to their homes and allowed to go for certain limited hours on a particular day of the week, when streets were relatively less crowded. It was a policy that restricted freedom and at the same time reflected the state authorities' concern for the fragile health and relatively weakened physical condition of their elderly citizens who were more vulnerable to infection and who, if infected, would suffer more and need more time to recover. It was a policy that sought to draw on at least two universal moral principles: sanctity of life and the equality of all human beings. In accordance with the former, it ensured that the life of every living being should be protected, because life itself is sacred; and in compliance with the latter, it reinforced the principle that all humans, young and old alike, man and woman alike, ought to be treated equally and justly. In order to implement the latter, i.e. the principle of equality, the former, i.e. the sanctity of life, must be ensured. Though this policy limited the free movement of a certain group of people and hence seemingly did injustice to them, it was purposely designed to protect their lives. It was thus congruent with universal human rights and moral values.

In these challenging times, we have also observed that people, primarily in Europe and North America, overwhelmed by panic, rushed to markets and grocery stores and began purchasing food, drink and other items, in quantities far more than really needed and to hoard them selfishly in their

houses. Such egocentric behaviour, which can only be described as morally reprehensible, have demonstrated the sad fact that many human virtues, such as ‘contentment’, ‘caring’, ‘sharing’ and ‘cooperation,’ have all but disappeared in these economically and technologically developed capitalist countries. It would appear overwhelming individualism and egoism attitudes have over time become supreme values, reflecting to what an extent the conditions and requirements of living together in society have been forgotten, with everyone obsessed with his/her needs only, with no regard whatsoever for the needs of others. As a consequence of leading such self-obsessed lives, people have either completely forgotten, or purposely neglected, things they once collectively practiced as moral virtues, such as caring and sharing. Universally praised and widely practiced religious and moral teachings, such as, “love your neighbour as you love yourself” and “wish for others as you wish yourself,” are paid only lip service.

In sharp contrast to such insensitivity, some countries—Turkey included—moved to provide their own population with protective medical equipment such as face masks and gloves, but also dispatched medical materials to other countries, poor and rich, more developed and less developed ones, where need was greatest. In so doing they demonstrated, both *de facto* and *de jure*, the significance of such forgotten moral virtues as sharing and caring at the international level.

Conclusion

What kind of meaning can we find in this *new normal* made up of uncertainty, not to say existential doubt? To respond to this philosophical question from Heidegger’s perspective, there are two things in life that provide meaning: one is whatever they work at and care about, the projects in which they are involved; the other is their relation with other people. For Heidegger, then, people find meaning either in the activities they are engaged in or when they are together with others. But, because of the current pandemic, people have had to suspend their projects and activities in addition to cutting themselves off from other people as a result of long periods of self-isolation. In such circumstances, life has probably lost much of its meaning, seen from the perspective of Heidegger. Life itself, which they once fully enjoyed, is now devoid of meaning. Most people nowadays feel emptiness in their lonely lives.

Still, we must ask ourselves if there was really any meaning in the things we were so dearly attached to, the projects we were deeply engaged in and the routine daily activities we were usually accustomed to. Did all those things, projects and activities give, in the true sense of the word, true meaning to our lives? If the response is affirmative, then we may begin fresh projects and activities in this so-called *new normal* such as learning new things, and thereby making life meaningful again. From this perspective, life will go on and the new things we work on will over time become routine.

If we examine the current crisis from a strictly philosophical viewpoint, it cannot be viewed as an existential one. For what is at stake is not necessarily the fate of the human species or its extinction from the world. Despite tens of thousands of human deaths, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, based on the current available statistical data, the total number of losses across the globe till now constitutes less than 5 percent of the world population. Of real concern are the disappearance of universal human values; the loss of morality and spirituality of humanity, and the concomitant rise of materialism and egocentrism. Will human beings, after having gone through this painful experience, be able to return to their pristine state and their primordial nature (*fitra*) and realize that they are not merely biological and physical beings composed of flesh, bones, and skins, but on the contrary are, as unanimously proclaimed by all Prophets, first and foremost spiritual beings equipped with the powerful faculties. The great question is this: will humans be able to assume their duties to their Creator and to their fellows with a sense of responsibility and accountability in full accordance with the purpose of their creation.

While focusing our attention on the adverse effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the nations of the world, we must not overlook the possibility that it may yield some positive results and even make some significant contributions to the wellbeing of humanity. For, if we closely ponder its possible positive effects, we can discern that the real issue is not necessarily the epidemiological nature of the pandemic, but rather what kind of impact it will have on the way people behave and on the attitudes they will develop and display in a dramatically changed post-pandemic environment.

Before, people had been leading routine lives, as if by clockwork. When all of this sudden ground to a halt, people looked on as all they had previously possessed, materially and immaterially, individually and socially, was gradually taking leave of them. Before the pandemic, we sought comfort in the company of others; now we find it in isolation; once soldiers and police were the protectors of a country, now doctors and nurses are in charge; every country had its own enemies, now the entire world has a common enemy; once people had easy access to everything they needed and were free to consume anything they wished, now they have limited access and are not free to get anything they want; once individualism reigned supreme, now there is forced collectivism; once living in society and being active in social life were encouraged, now staying aloof from society is almost a standard norm; active is once living in an extended family was strongly recommended, now it is discouraged and living alone is urged; once daily affairs were carried out face to face, now even important meetings are taking place and decisions taken on virtual platforms; once instructors were teaching in classrooms amidst warm interaction, now they communicate with their students with virtual means. In brief, every variety of human activity is now taking place, and will continue to be so, in a climate of uncertainty shaped by these paradoxes. The routine activities and daily affairs in which people were once habitually engaged in their *old normal* lives are very likely to be carried on under forcibly changed and continuously changing

conditions in this *new normal* life. These changing attitudes and behaviours will likely become standard norms over time, and promise an unpredictable impact on the fundamental moral values of society.

Despite the apparently negative effects of the pandemic, one final remark must be made before concluding: if people can reflect more closely and comprehensively on current conditions, they will be able to discern that the Coronavirus pandemic has given them a great opportunity to return to their own inner world, especially when they found themselves in self-isolation or retreat--*khalwah* in Muslim mystical terms. They may thus re-discover themselves and thereby find answers to such vital questions as who they are, why they are here on this planet, and what things are truly important in their lives. The crisis has prepared the ground for realizing the vital significance of moral virtues, such as justice, goodness, fraternity, friendship, generosity, kindness, respect, caring, sharing, cooperation, love and compassion, all of which are very much needed but largely forgotten by humanity because of the countervailing negative qualities of selfishness and extreme individualism. Every nation would thus derive moral lessons from the pandemic and strive, in a spirit of cooperation, and in the light of universal human values and moral virtues, for the wellbeing of all humanity.

References

- Ali, M. M. (2020). Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic: An Islamic perspective. *Muslim Mirror*. Access: <http://muslimmirror.com/eng/tackling-the-covid-19-pandemic-an-islamic-perspective/>
- Authers, J. (2020). How Coronavirus Is Shaking Up the Moral Universe. *Bloomberg Opinion*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-29/coronavirus-pandemic-puts-moral-philosophy-to-the-test>
- Bach, T. (2020). Will Suicides Rise Because of COVID-19? <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-05-22/experts-warn-of-a-surge-of-suicides-tied-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic>
- Brown, L. (2020). Evangelical pastor claims coronavirus is God's 'death angel' to 'purge a lot of sin'. *New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2020/01/29/evangelical-pastor-claims-coronavirus-is-gods-death-angel-to-purge-a-lot-of-sin/>
- Cohen, E. (2020). Coronavirus in the Eyes of Muslim Clerics. *The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies – BESA*. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/coronavirus-muslim-clerics/>
- Daily Post. https://www.postguam.com/news/local/president-trump-declares-houses-of-worship-essential-orders-they-be-allowed-to-reopen/article_8f6cdcf6-9c7f-11ea-ac8a-7fda59d5940f.html
- DeJesus, I. (2020). Faith leaders reject the idea that coronavirus is punishment from God for a sinful world. *PennLive Patriot-News*. <https://www.pennlive.com/coronavirus/2020/03/faith-leaders-reject-the-idea-that-coronavirus-is-punishment-from-god-for-a-sinful-world.html>
- Doody, C. (2020). Vatican official: Coronavirus “not God’s punishment, but our own self-punishment”. *Novena – Europe Church News*. Access: <https://novenanews.com/vatican-official-coronavirus-not-gods-punishment/>
- Gilad, E. (2020). How Judaism Handled Epidemics Down the Ages. *Haaretz*. <https://www.haaretz.com/science-and-health/premium-coronavirus-epidemic-history-jewish-1.8724141>

- Gordon, S. (2020). Coronavirus pandemic may lead to 75,000 “deaths of despair” from suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, study says. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-deaths-suicides-drugs-alcohol-pandemic-75000/>
- Görmez, M. (2020). Coronavirus Özelinde Musibetleri Okuma Usûlü. *İslam Düşünce Enstitüsü*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a6GWYCs3Yk>
- Haque, M. (2020). How to View Calamities from an Islamic Perspective. *American Muslim Diversity Association – AMDA*. <https://www.amda.us/index.php/khutba/550-how-to-view-calamities-from-an-islamic-perspective-feb-14-2020>
- Hitchcock, M. (2020). *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse*. Thomas Nelson.
- Humphreys, J. (2020). Are we all Kantians now? The COVID-19 effect on moral philosophy. *The Irish Times*. Access: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/are-we-all-kantians-now-the-covid-19-effect-on-moral-philosophy-1.4229595>
- Kettley, S. (2020). Coronavirus in the Bible: Bizarre claim virus is punishment for Christian persecution. *Express*. Access: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/1258745/Coronavirus-Bible-virus-punishment-God-Christian-persecution-COVID-19>
- Kuşpınar, B. (2020a). ‘From Self-isolation to Self-realization’ Islamic Spirituality | Part 2. *Diyanet Center of America*. Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqYjr8zC-uQ>
- Kuşpınar, B. (2020b). ‘Preservation of Health’ Islamic Spirituality Lectures | Part 3. *Diyanet Center of America*. Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArAlxDXE-to>
- Macneil, M. (2020). *COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus: God’s Blessing or Satan’s Curse?*. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.18360.70407/1. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael_Macneil2/publication/340772114_COVID-19_Novel_Coronavirus_God’s_Blessing_or_Satan’s_Curse/links/5e9cc4cb4585150839ebcddb5/COVID-19-Novel-Coronavirus-Gods-Blessing-or-Satans-Curse
- Martin, J. (2020). Where Is God in a Pandemic? *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/opinion/coronavirus-religion.html>
- Scanlon, F. R. (2020). “Is the Coronavirus A Punishment From God?” *Commentary on Catholic Issues*. <https://frregisscanlon.com/index.php/2020/03/29/is-the-coronavirus-a-punishment-from-god/>
- US News. (2020). *Islamic State Calls COVID-19 God’s Punishment for Foes: Tape*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-05-28/islamic-state-calls-covid-19-gods-punishment-for-foes-tape>

