

# LOSS OF RIGHT CHOICE: Ethical Quandary in the Wake of Coronavirus

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**Abstract:** The coronavirus pandemic along with large scale destruction of human life has triggered a collapse of our moral principles and ethical values. We are facing an inescapable ethical responsibility as we seem to have a new power to cough another person to death. This study attempts to seek an equate response to our moral quandaries. The study attempts to consider the moral culpability of akratic actions under the precarious conditions of inescapable vulnerabilities introduced by coronavirus. This consideration of weakening of human will or agency is profoundly significant to account for the morality of human actions, triggered through customised advertisements or messages to targeted individuals as a result Big Data analytics to serve the interest of commerce or politics.

**Keywords:** *Akrasia*, Big Other, Coronavirus, COVID-19, *Das Ding*, Ethics of Cohabitation, Precarity, Responsibility, Vulnerability.

## 1. Introduction

The fact that one can almost cough one's other to death has opened a moral quandary in the wake of the global pandemic of coronavirus. Every human person must face the possibility of being both the victim as well as the vector of a lethal infection. Hence, we are robbed of our ability to do the right thing as real possibilities of getting infected as well as passing the infections are growing by the day. This study attempts to examine our precarity and vulnerability under the present condition of

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humanity and strives to offer us an ethical compass to tide these uncertain times.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first part raises the issue and highlights our moral condition that seems to have brought about a collapse of ethical principles and values. The second part considers our ethical responsibility from the point of view of the ethics of responsibility and ethics of cohabitation of Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler, respectively. Having discerned that the ethical responses considered in the second part of the paper are largely inadequate, we try to expose how the new condition brought about by coronavirus has weakened the will or intention of human action and with the help of the notion of *akrasia*, as developed by Aristotle to mean weakened will, we try to include the morality of acts of transmission of the lethal infection in the third part of the paper. Here we are particularly concerned with the morality of transmission of the infection by an asymptomatic patient who is completely unaware of being infected by the virus. Finally, with the help of psychoanalysis principles of Lacan and Žižek, we propose a moral compass that considers our precarity, vulnerability and transmissibility of the lethal infection.

## **2. Facing the Collapse of Ethics**

Martin Heidegger had pointed out that our finitude has brought upon us the forgetfulness of finitude (Grondin 213). It remains hidden to us and we need to wake up to it. Forgetting our finitude is indeed our original sin in the Heideggerian sense. He taught us that it is because of it that we are into a technological trap (Cerbone 139-140). Maybe the coronavirus brings to our memory our own finitude. We are slowly awaking to the fact of our finitude. We cannot be dead wrong on this issue because the infection of coronavirus puts us on the line between death and life. Our safety is fast crashing on the shore, and it is difficult to tag responsibility and accountability of the same. This is because the vectors of the infection being themselves victims have become agents without agency. This is even truer of

asymptomatic vectors of the pandemic that are not even aware of their own infectious condition. We seem to have reached a condition where our ethical principles seem to have become unable to consider the morality of our complex condition. This condition also warrants us to awaken our thinking on our finitude.

The awakening to our harsh reality is also leading to a kind of reversing of Heideggerian thought that is overly concerned with decontamination of thought (Kelley 124). His decontamination of philosophy has been linked to Nazism. This view is also closer to the purity pollution principle of the caste system in India. The coronavirus is opening our path to thinking that we cannot think in binaries of pollution and purity anymore. Things are complex. Everything is somehow contaminated. There is no original or pure. Everything is simply copy or counterfeit. Aristotle's notion of mixed act may describe the condition of humanity.

Paradoxically, we are being driven to reverse some aspects of Heideggerian thought based on the phenomenological method that Heidegger himself used in all his work. Maybe Heidegger's phenomenology of technology will illustrate this point. Heidegger does not think technology in an instrumentalist manner of means and ends but considers it as a mode of revelation (Riis 124-126). Thus, technology can reveal to us that our fields are having iron ore reserves. Suddenly, the fields that had revealed themselves as agricultural lands now show itself as a land of mineral reserves. We can, therefore, draw our attention to how our world, humans, and God are revealing themselves to us in the wake of coronavirus pandemic.

Within this mode of phenomenological reflection of Heidegger, we can find another important question to think in his analysis of technology. Heidegger thinks this mode of revealing things or having things present at hand is not something that we do to us. We find ourselves thrown into this condition. This means he says that in a very real sense technology is taking away our agency (Phillips 804). We are trapped or enframed by technology (Rockmore 225).

This condition of humanity and its ethical implications were further developed by his student, Hans Jonas who teaches that technology has displaced ethics and all our moral principles cannot account for it. Technology has changed the very nature of human action (Jonas 227). This is because technology has given weak human actions power to bring lasting and even tragic effects on nature and humanity. Besides, he finds that ethics had largely been the prisoner of anthropocentrism and therefore, he launches on to develop his ethics of responsibility. Drawing on these thoughts, we may have to ask: has coronavirus pandemic once again displaced the principles of ethics? Does it reveal that we have an obligation to rethink ethics to account for the weak agency of the asymptomatic vectors of new coronavirus? How are we to unpack this human vulnerability?

Unfortunately, we are in a precarious condition where human vulnerabilities are manufactured. Big data analytics is used to study and prey upon these vulnerabilities for commercial as well as political gains. The manufacturing of human consent has gained immense power with the growth of social media and the allied communication revolution. This is why the corona moment of humanity may carry with it a kairological light for ethics to consider the weakening of human agency under the AI and other communication network technologies.

We are faced once again with the finitude of humanity. It would be a kind of Hegelian madness to think that the world is driven by ideal philosophy. The world stays complexly messy and is driven by several interests that may develop new or use existing philosophies. This is why we need critical philosophy as an afterthought. Being a thought after pre-existing thought, it has critical as well as emancipative power. We need an after philosophy that will consider our precarious condition of the weakening of agency and revisit our ethical principles. This does not necessarily mean that ethics is dead, and we have to resurrect new ethics. It simply means ethics requires a new updating exercise.

The ethics of the individual good (virtue ethics), the ethics of common good (utilitarianisms), and the ethics of means to an end, and the ethics of responsibility are not ruled out but are inadequate. We must consider precarity or tremendous unpredictability into the ethical quandaries that are forced up us by the eruption of coronavirus pandemic. We feel being addressed in a Levinasian way to an ethical response. But this response also makes us vulnerable to the infection of coronavirus. But we cannot simply withdraw from this ethical obligation. As caretakers of humanity and the planet earth, we have this ethical obligation of cohabitation.

And what if (against all our good intentions,) we happen to be asymptomatic vectors of the infection? Our responsiveness cannot be imprisoned by a weakened agency. It is difficult to find any rational basis to think of a person who is vulnerable to destruction by the other simultaneously will feel responsible for the same other. Emanuel Levinas teaches us that we are all responsible for that which persecutes us (Bernasconi 236). In this context, he does not say that we bring persecution upon us as some psychologists might tell us. He uses persecution as a strange and disconcerting name to the ethical demand that we impose on us against our will. This means for Levinas, the claims that the other have on us are above our will. Others right to exist has primacy over my own (Westphal 16). This is so because we are fundamentally defined by ethical relations; we are ethical inter-subjectivity (Bergo 9). Situations become complex in this context because it can imply our destruction. Will responsibility to the other in this context that may be suicidal to the self be an ethical obligation? This is why we may need to re-visit our ethics to factor the changed condition of humanity post-COVID-19.

### **3. Facing our Inescapable Responsibility**

The issue of transmission of COVID-19 manifests a weakening of our agency. We are into a condition of precarity and vulnerability that makes us both victims and vectors of the coronavirus. Therefore, it seems to have reached a point that has dislocated our reigning ethical theories. The changed condition

is disclosing that our ethical principles and theories are inadequate, and we need fresh thinking to account for it. Levinasian ethics of passivity and relational responsibility grounded in the imperative of the other appears to still hold the fort for us. But since it is based on his ethics as first philosophy by which he effectively blurs the boundaries between ethics, metaphysics, and anthropology, it may not have many adherents. To Emmanuel Levinas's ethics is not a virtue that we exercise but it is prior to any individual sense of self (Bergo 165). By being ethical, I individuate myself. He seems to say that, 'I am ethical therefore, I am.' This means I am already bound to the other to be myself in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. To him my injurability is also bound to the answerability of my ethical response (Golanka 198). Thus, risking oneself while one is serving the sick COVID-19 patients is profoundly ethical and not suicidal. In Levinasian ethics, the ethical obligation is an answer to an ethical responsibility that does not exclude one's death.

Something has changed because of corona virus. How can one calculate the moral culpability of the vector of coronavirus when he/she is not aware of being a victim of the same virus? To Levinas, we are never dispossessed of our ethical relationality and responsibility to the other. Being ethical by our very being, we cannot be divested of our ethical call. But in a situation where my responsiveness to an ethical call can injure the other even without my knowledge as we see in the case of the asymptomatic vector of COVID-19, we are facing an ethical paradox.

The other calls on me so I answer; I answer because I am already answerable. But in my responsive obligation to the other what if I being an asymptomatic vector of COVID-19? Am I ethically responsible for the act of communication of infection that I am not even aware of? This means my agency is weakened or does not exist. Hence, Levinasian ethics appears to have reached a dead end as we face the pandemic of coronavirus. Maybe Hannah Arendt's thought helps us to get out of this ethical quandary.

Hannah Arendt has given us an ethics of cohabitation. In her argument against Adolf Eichmann who thought that law had given him the duty to oversee which populations could live and which populations could die under Nazism, she teaches that no one has the prerogative to choose with whom to cohabit the earth (Butler, "Hannah Arendt's"). We are thrown into the world and we are to live with whom we find ourselves cohabiting the earth. She says that the unchosen character of our earthly cohabitation is the fundamental condition of our very being ethical as well as political (Butler, "Precarious Life").

We cannot choose that which is not chosen for us. Unfortunately, we are violating the ethics of cohabitation in several ways today in our country and several other places in the world. Most theologies of Promised Land, as well as chosen people, may engender genocidal practices. Our life is bound with those that we may destroy. Arendt clearly wants to belong to the unchosen people. This is how morality of an inadvertent action of asymptomatic patients of COVID-19 becomes an ethical issue. Although Arendt's position remains within anthropocentrism and pleads for ethics of cohabitation for humanity, we may add an ecological dimension to her ethics of cohabitation. Judith Butler does exactly this.

Judith Butler thinks that ethics is intimately bound with our bodily life. All ethical claims presuppose bodily life understood as injurable and not restricted to humans alone (Butler, "Precarious Life"). After all, a life that is worth safeguarding, and must be protected from murder (Levinas) or genocide (Arendt) is based on non-human life in an essential way. Maybe it is relevant here to remind us that Derrida has taught us that we humans cannot forget that we are human animals (Oliver 120). Therefore, we have an imperative to make life livable. It is on this condition that Butler builds her ethics of cohabitation that transcends anthropocentric limitations of Arendt. Human acts of grave omission, as well as commission, are morally culpable if they bring about a disaster of making life not livable. We make life livable interdependently and are co-responsible for it.

The eruption of coronavirus into our world has certainly added to the conditions that make life not livable. The disease has put us into a precarious condition and we now seem to protect some and leave some people to their fate. Having neglected health infrastructure to build commerce on bodily life that puts health for sale, our acts of omissions have now led us to choose between those lives that are grievable and those lives ungrievable. Those that are grievable are thought to be valuable and ungrievable are of no value. By not testing enough we are exposing our moral hollowness and we do not feel the guilt that someone's life is thought to be disposable as well as ungrievable. We have the imperative to overcome this ethical blindness.

This is our best opportunity to rethink ethics to include the morality of weakened agency. We are already experiencing a weakened agency through the manufacture of our consent for the market and politics by big data analytics as well as the vector that transfers the infection of coronavirus without knowing it. In both cases, human vulnerabilities are constructed. In the first case, it is an economic and political vested interest that creates the conditions that may weaken our agency while in the second case it is the novel virus that becomes a condition that constructs our vulnerabilities and weakens our agency. Maybe we have to return to Aristotle's work on *akrasia* or the weakness of the will to analyse a constructed weakness of the will that we are facing right now. The failure of intentionality that we are considering here with critical attention is not wilful. It is inflicted on us by our precarious conditions.

#### **4. Facing the Weakening of our Will**

The moral quandary that we are facing due to the eruption of coronavirus pandemic challenges most of our ethical principles. Today most of us have become potential vectors of coronavirus. Now that we do not have any known cure for the infection and that the disease can lead to death, we cannot simply think that we are not morally culpable for transmission of the same. We have the ethical obligation of the care of self as well as that of other's bodily life.

Hence, the only ethical option that we have is to observe strict social distancing as well as observe personal hygiene like face masks and hand sanitizers. This means even those that are already victims of coronavirus have an ethical responsibility to take adequate treatment as well as quarantine themselves so as not to transmit the lethal virus to others. This is why even those who are asymptomatic victims of COVID-19 have moral responsibility to protect themselves and the other. We can derive these ethical obligations from our existing ethical principles.

Unfortunately, the new condition of humanity under COVID-19 has manifested us our precarity as well as vulnerability. Precarity is the unpredictability of catching an infection as well as transmitting the same. Vulnerability is the condition that increases the possibility of us being both victims as well as vectors. Both precarity and vulnerability intensify as there are also asymptomatic victims and vectors of the lethal infection. Governments have factored this along with the metabolism of the virus and enforced strict lockdowns.

Given the gravity of the condition, we cannot dismiss the morality of the vectors whether symptomatic or asymptomatic as the case of lack of knowledge and intention. I rather consider it as a case of a weakened agency or failure of intentionality inflicted on us by conditions that cash on our vulnerabilities. Therefore, a weakened will or intention has to be brought within the moral calculus as we are facing a situation of life and death. The new phenomenon of global pandemic is weakening our will power from outside just like Big Data Analytics is being used to prey on our vulnerabilities for profits in economics and politics. Our search for the morality of a weakened will is both urgent and relevant.

A weakened will has been already considered in the ancient Greek philosophers. Socrates taught that ignorance (*agonia*) weakened the morality of the action of the person (Westacott).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We are not talking of Socratic ignorance that is thought to be wisdom. Socratic ignorance is captured by the statement: 'I know only one thing - that I know nothing'. *Agonia* that we are talking about is imperfect knowledge posing as perfect knowledge.

This is why for him, ignorance is vice, and knowledge is a virtue. This means it is the weakness of knowledge that leads to the weakness of will. Socrates does deny the weakness of will. To him will simply submit to knowledge. Imperfect knowledge weakens our action. When this happens, we have what he calls the phenomena of bad choice or *pathema* (Laderoute).

The Greeks did discuss the condition of a person who knows what is good but unwilling to do it. Protagoras, for instance, thinks that such people are overcome by pleasure, pain, love, fear, etc. Plato did recognize this loss of self-control because of the conflict of human desires (Laderoute). But Plato does not use the term *akrasia* to describe this weakening of the will. It is used by Xenophon and Aristotle.

For Aristotle, the term *akrasia* describes a condition of a person who clearly knows what one has to do but does not do it because of a lack of right sort of desire to do it (Cittingham 732). This seems to stay within Socratic *summum bonum*, 'Know thy self' where a defect within it brings about a weakened will that leads to *akratic* action. It seems that we are becoming more and more *akratic* persons today with the rise of social media, AI, communication revolution, and the disruption of coronavirus. Naturally, an *akratic* action is thought to be blameworthy as it does not follow the prudential calculus of Aristotle. It is viewed as a primary failure of self mastery ordered by the Socratic dictum 'know thy self'.

Lubomira Radoilska thinks *akratic* actions are pre-intentional actions. They are actions done not out of choice. Radoilska tries to interpret intention as a choice in order to understand Aristotle who thinks that *akratic* actions are those actions where a person does not act according to his/her choice. This means *akratic* action displays a lack of discernment. But it is possible to have the right discernment but still not do the right action. Aristotle dismisses such instances as cases of moral depravity. Thus, for Aristotle *akratic* action does not include an agent's choice but nevertheless leads to moral action that fully engages his/her responsibility. Aristotle seems to think that *akratic* actions lead to the animalization of human beings. Since it is the immediate

pleasure that takes control of our motivation and action, it is viewed not as an intentional but is seen as pre-intentional action. Therefore, we can still think of it as a weak voluntary action. It is voluntariness without the right choice.

We seem to have entered this phase where we can act willingly but do not have the luxury of the right choice. We have choices. But our choices are defective. Choices are not taken away from us. But our power of choice has lost the power to do the right choice as we are manipulated or instigated to make choices that we would otherwise not make because of operations of big corporations using Big Data Analytics. Here we can still resist this clever deception. But it is not easy. In the situation of the pandemic, being potentially able to harm others to the point of death, we are robbed of the right choice. This means we have become akratic people.

Nothing stops us from exercising our choice, but we simply do not have the right choice. This choice that is not the right choice is voluntary and we are responsible for our akratic acts. Therefore, we are required to carefully consider the moral status of these akratic acts. Right now, unfortunately, deprived of the right choice, we are mostly left with what Socrates might describe as a bad choice. The absence of the right choice does not mean defective choices are all evil. Their moral culpability will depend on the consequences of those actions. If they really transmit the lethal disease, then they are certainly morally wrong acts. Thus, we have made room for the akratic act in the moral calculus. The question remains: Is consequentialism the only moral compass that we can use to ascertain the morality of these actions? Reflection must continue.

## 5. Resolving our Moral Quandaries

We are facing a moral pathology. We no longer have the right choice. The thing of the choice or *das Ding* is gone missing (Fachinelli).<sup>2</sup> We are left with several choices. But in the context

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<sup>2</sup>I use the term *das Ding* to mean something essential or central to a thing. I am using it to think of void afflicting our choice as a result of the pandemic of SARS-CoV-2. It has links with how Jacques Lacan

of a condition created by a coronavirus, all our choices have entered a realm of precarity as well as vulnerability. Our choices make us vulnerable. This does not mean that we shall fall prey to our vulnerabilities. Falling prey to our vulnerabilities is precarious. It is not certain and cannot be predicted. This condition has punctured the egoistic calculus of ethics. There is no certainty of saving ourselves. As long as we do not have any medicine or vaccine for the lethal virus, we are always in danger of being its victims and vectors. We can get out of this chain only when we are hit by it and have been healed from it. Even this luxury it seems is taken away from us as we have heard of the return of the virus in patients who were declared healed of it.

The loss of *das Ding* of choice haunts all our choices. We cannot make the right choice. From the psychoanalytic point of view, we have come to the death of the Big Other (Wells 57). We cannot enjoy our choice because an exercise of it may not save us as well as the other. We seem to be facing the theft of an enjoyment of our choice (Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 201-203). All enjoyment requires the possibility of breaking the law of the Big Other. We can only enjoy behind the back of the law. With the death of the big Other, although we have an imperative to enjoy, we cannot enjoy it. The same is true of choice. With the right choice being denied, we cannot really enjoy our choices. We are walking the road to unfreedom. Actually, we are facing the real of our choice in Lacanian sense. The choice that we are left with has an excess. It has become an unbearable stain as the choice of the right thing has escaped our choice. We are not able to enjoy our decaffeinated choice.

With the death of the Big other, we have an imperative to enjoy our choice. All enjoyment has to occur at the back of the Big other. Since there is no Big other, we turn to interpassivity that allows us to delegate our enjoyment to a substitute/ other (Zizek, "The Interpassive Subject"). This is like watching a comedy show that also does the laughing for us. Maybe because

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used it to express intimate exteriority. It is profound void that a person has to deal with all his life.

we cannot enjoy our choice under the lockdown and the pandemic, we still enjoy a projection of war on it. Therefore, we may enjoy communalizing the coronavirus. We still deal with the coronavirus, but the fight is now delegated to those who are using it for communal propaganda. Just like we do get relieved after watching the comedy show that does the laughing for us, we also get relieved with our dose of communalism in the fight against coronavirus. It is a mode of enjoyment through the other. We seem to enjoy our choice through the choice of hate that the other lives. Since enjoyment belongs to the real of Lacan, it can never really be satisfied. It simply means that we have a desire to indulge into a limitless enjoyment. None of us can really enjoy limitlessly. This is why we need substitutes. The interpassivity is a mode of enjoying our castrated enjoyment. It does not satisfy. We have only one way: we must make a choice of our death.

It is exactly the missing *das Ding* of the choice that we cannot renounce. It is the desire of the death drive. By making that choice one puts one's neck on the line of death and recovers the thing of choice. It is only by passing through this zero point of having a choice without the possibility of making the right choice that we may align with Hegelian negation to arrive at a point of synthesis. Thus, by including into our choice possibility of one's death, we can recover *das Ding* of the choice. It can put us into a totally new zone of possibility. This means every choice that we make henceforth has to include a choice of the possibility of our death. It is by putting our life on the line of death that we can recover *das Ding* of our choice. Therefore, when one puts once death in the calculus of choice that one wishes to make one may recover the right thing that is missing in the choice in the face of coronavirus.

When every choice includes the possibility of one's death, even a person who has become a potential victim and vector will be enabled to make the right choice, the choice to save oneself and save one's other. By including the possibility of our own death in every choice that we make, we have possibility of putting all our choices in the ethical choice of the good or the right thing. This choice of the good/ the right is open to the

victims who are both symptomatic and asymptomatic. Hence, the eruption of the corona pandemic has brought about an expansion of the ethical realm. It has enabled us to put the precarity and vulnerability and possibility of transmission of the lethal infection into the moral calculus.

The inclusion of the possibility of one's death or grave harm to oneself may also enable us to make reasonable choices and not mindless ones when one receives triggering persuasions that are calculated and targeted to specific persons by Big Data analytics. Fear of one's death in the context of coronavirus may be justified for the inclusion of the moral calculus of one's choice. But when it comes to the deception of the Big Data analytics it is a weak moral compass. We still need discerning light to do the right choices when it comes to influences of the Big Data analytics that is both weakening our will and preying on it. Since it is working on reflexive dispositions, we will need to develop *phronesis* or practical wisdom that will enable us to see the deception at the right time. A weak will or akratic will may be enabled to choose the right/the good by including the possibility of one's death in the moral calculus in the context of coronavirus.

## 6. Conclusion

We have attempted to trace an adequate response to the moral quandaries that coronavirus has irrupted in our world. It has disrupted our ethical principles and values by stealing *das Ding* of our choice. We have our ability to make choices. But every choice that we make increases our chances of becoming a victim and a vector of the novel virus. We think that we are left with inability to make the right choice. By considering the possibility of our death into the consideration of our moral choice in the context of this extraordinary condition of humanity, we hope to enable us to do the right choice.

Our study indicates the importance of the need to consider the condition of weakened human agency/will to assess the morality of human acts as a result of changed human condition. Besides the coronavirus, human will is also weakened by Big Data analytics that will aim to manipulate humans to make

choices that are driven by aesthetic pleasures rather than mindful critical action. The present study does not fully respond to the ethical condition brought about by the Big Data world that has elements of surveillance and loss of personal privacy. Hence, our reflection on akratic human actions and their moral culpability must continue.

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