

A microscopic view of numerous coronavirus particles, appearing as spherical structures with a textured surface and prominent spike-like projections. The particles are scattered across a dark red background, with one large, detailed particle centered in the lower half of the frame. The overall image has a high-contrast, scientific aesthetic.

# PANDEMICS AND SOCIAL VALUES: REOPENING AMERICA

ERIKA BLACKSHER, PHD  
DEPARTMENT OF BIOETHICS AND HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
IAPHS COVID19 WEBINAR  
MAY 21, 2020

An illustration of a diverse crowd of people, all wearing white face masks. The people are depicted in various colors and styles, representing different ethnicities and ages. They are shown from the chest up, looking in various directions. The background is a solid yellow color.

## TWO ETHICAL QUESTIONS

What does the Covid-19 epidemiological and economic landscape tell us about what and who we value?

What social values should guide us in reopening America?

“[Pandemics] reveal what really matters to a population and whom they truly value.”

David S. Jones. History in a Crisis—Lessons for Covid-19, NEJM April 30, 2020

- Outsized health and economic toll on communities of color, low income people, women
- Stigmatization and violence against people of Asian ancestry, as “sources of infection”
- Differential enforcement of physical distancing measures for people of color

“[Pandemics] reveal what really matters to a population and whom they truly value.”

David S. Jones. History in a Crisis—Lessons for Covid-19, NEJM April 30, 2020

- Fragmented, fragile, or nonexistent systems of social protection, security, and opportunity
- A constellation of American values at work over the past 5 decades?
  - Individualism – self-reliance, individual liberty, personal responsibility
  - Federalism – a patchwork, uneven systems and protections
  - Free enterprise – preferences for free-market solutions and resistance to government intervention



What social values should guide us in reopening the nation?



Picture from Vox: America doesn't want another Tea Party: Don't let Fox News fool you. 81% of Americans do not share the views of anti-quarantine protesters. April 20, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/20/21225016/protests-stay-at-home-orders-trump-conservative-group-michigan>

## What social values should guide us in reopening the nation?

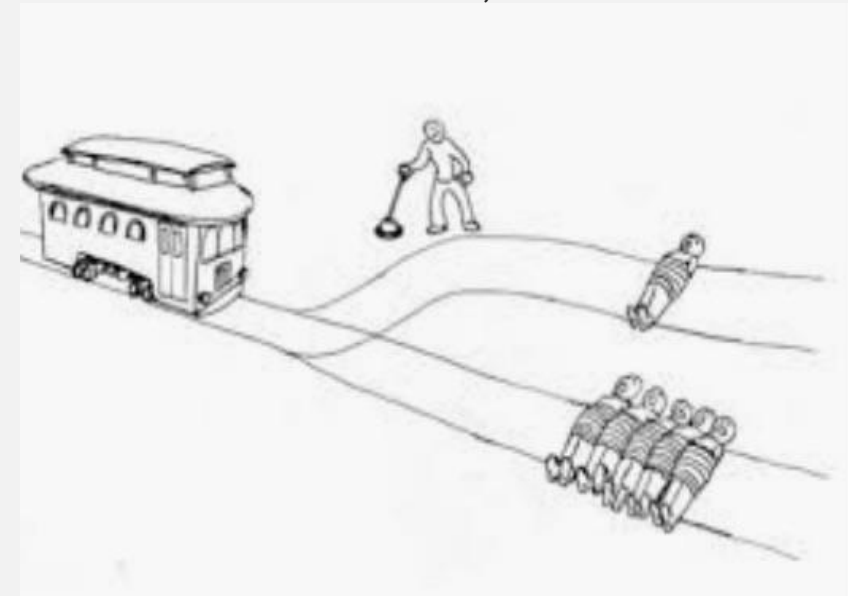
- Utilitarian values?
- Just war framework?
- Social justice and solidarity?
- Others?

# UTILITARIAN CALCULUS

“It pains us to say it, but US president Donald Trump is right.  
We cannot let the cure be worse than the disease.”

Peter Singer and Michael Plant, “When will the pandemic cure be worse than the disease?” Project Syndicate April 6, 2020

- Assumption = tradeoff must be made between lives and livelihoods
  - “at some point we are willing to trade loss of life against loss of wellbeing”
  - Lockdowns have health benefits and save lives but also have costs such as social isolation, unemployment, bankruptcies, reduced GDP...
- Single unit of value/good = wellbeing (for Singer)
- Utilitarian goal is aggregate good
  - “Greatest good for the greatest number”
  - Lives lost *and* life years lost
- Challenges/counterarguments
  - There is no tradeoff between public health and economy
  - Favors the status quo
  - Flawed conception of the good
  - Distributive neutrality



# JUST WAR

“[T]he time hasn’t come yet to finely measure tradeoffs. The appropriate analogy for our moment is Pearl Harbor....The country needs to transition to a war footing.”

Danielle Allen, “America needs to be on a war footing.” The Washington Post, March 20, 2020

- Assumption = Covid19 poses an existential threat
- Just War goals
  - Meet the public health emergency and secure health infrastructure with strategies that (a) are evidence-based and coordinated (b) protect civil liberties, (c) do not perpetrate injustice and (d) do not destroy the economy – all with transparency.
  - Preserve durability and sustainability of institutions necessary for a constitutional democracy
  - Create capacity and norms for life with a virus like Covid19 likely to periodically reappear
  - Plan and set clear objectives for transitioning off emergency footing
- Multiple goods – save lives, preserve society and institutions of democracy, protect civil liberties, ensure equal justice, transparency
- “[T]he goal is not to defeat the enemy at any cost but to preserve one’s society, including preserving the kind of society it is.” Danielle Allen et al. Securing Justice, Health, and Democracy against the COVID-19 Threat”  
March 20, 2020.
- Challenges/counterarguments





# SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY

“I have some strange hope that out of all this pain will come a new context in which America, with all of our divisions, with all of our past, will [not] just accept normalcy.”

Reverend Dr. William Barber, Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church, Goldsboro, North Carolina

- Assumption = Covid-19 reveals latent, unjust, and unacceptable structures in America
- Social Justice goals
  - Seize upon the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to reimagine and remake America
  - Eliminate racism and sexism; decriminalize and eliminate poverty; end mass incarceration
  - Guarantee all persons the right to vote, equity in education, healthcare, living wages, paid sick leave, safe housing, equal protection and justice
- Potential for Solidarity
  - “Sometimes in the midst of pain, something very unusual happens and that is the very moment that people get up and nothing is the same afterward.”
  - A definition: “Shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry ‘costs’ (financial, social, emotional, or otherwise) to assist others” Prainsack B, Buyx A (2012) Solidarity in contemporary bioethics- towards a new approach. Bioethics 26(7):343-350.
- Challenges/counterarguments
  - A lack of moral and political imagination



# OTHER ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR REOPENING THE NATION

## UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY FRAMEWORK

- Fair and equal access to healthcare
- Shared economic sacrifice
- Enhance social relationships
- Protect democracy, rights and liberties
- Build a sustainable future

## THE HASTINGS CENTER FRAMEWORK

- Science – use evidence
- Solidarity – share sacrifice
- Truth telling – be transparent
- Equal worth of all persons
- Gratitude to essential workers

Q&A  
Thank You  
[eb2010@uw.edu](mailto:eb2010@uw.edu)  
[erika.blacksher@gmail.com](mailto:erika.blacksher@gmail.com)

