

Lockdown Lag

Lockdown becomes more tolerable when it's of our own choosing

Think about what is the most rational and morally right thing for us to do ourselves, writes Lisa Foran

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To lockdown or not to lockdown? That is the question of 2020. By no means the only one, but certainly the one that drifts into the minds of most of us at some point each week, if several times a day of late. Why did lockdown make many feel giddy with solidarity and good will in March, but petulant and irritated by October? Why was the government 'following the science' of NPHET during St Patrick's festival but for Halloween is making political decisions based on the 'bigger picture'? And more practically, how can we deal with lockdown lag? That frumpy older sibling of the jet-setting kind, that brings all of the blariness with none of the glamour.

Highly contagious, often asymptomatic, and airborne: COVID is an immunologist's worse nightmare. Lockdowns slow the spread and stagger hospital admissions to prevent avoidable deaths. But they also cost: jobs, businesses, revenue but also contact, affection, normality and even hope. So how do we balance these losses and gains?

Philosophy offers several ways of answering ethical questions like this. Two broad camps are: those who say we know what is right or wrong by looking at the consequences of an action (consequentialists) and on the other hand those who say an action must be judged right or wrong in its own right (deontologists).

The government's response to COVID has largely been argued from a consequentialist position. In March, the claim was that a total lockdown would slow the spread, preventing a rush on hospital beds and ultimately resulting in at least less avoidable deaths. The negative consequences could be sufficiently off-set by funds that were then available. Furthermore, in March when we went into the tunnel of lockdown, we didn't know just how far away the light was.

Flash to October and Varadkar is arguing that the negative consequences of another total lockdown would accumulate to tip the balance: the loss of jobs would be greater than before; the toll on non-COVID related health concerns would be greater; isolation and loneliness would be intensified during dark winter months; and without a clear exit strategy people may lose hope entirely.

As I write the government are weighing the scales of lockdown consequences again, and it may well be the case that totting up the toll of this particular equation will not be possible until its various consequences have irrevocably played out.

So, what do we do?

What about that other option for moral quandaries: chose what is 'good in itself'? This is a view put forward by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who claims that in our moral actions we must act freely

by using our rationality. Because we are rational, we are free and because we are free, we are responsible for our own acts. We must each freely create a 'law' or a rule that we follow ourselves. But there are caveats – the rules we make must themselves be rational and we must wish them to be universal.

If I want to lie to you, I have to imagine a world where everyone lies all the time. Such a world would be intolerable, and for Kant it would be irrational to will it into existence. I must not lie, then, because I cannot wish for lying to be universal. What is so interesting about this account is that when we act morally, we act rationally, and when we act rationally, we are most free. Being autonomous means making a law or rule (*nomos*) by and for the self (*auto*). We do this as individuals acting each time alone, but with the hope that others will act in the same way.

One reason so many people could endure lockdown early on was that they felt their actions were having real consequences. The numbers of cases and hospitalisations went down. Most of us want most people to be well, and most of us are ok with a little bit of discomfort (maybe even a lot of discomfort) if it means overall everyone does better. But when it feels like our actions are not having the desired consequences – COVID is still here – most of us will get despondent. We get irritated when we think we are being asked to do something for no good reason or, when we feel like we are being forced to do something that not everyone else is doing.

To minimise the impact of jet lag we are told to adjust our body clock as soon as possible to the time zone of our new location. How do we adjust to lockdown land? Maybe a shift in perspective can help. Rather than thinking in terms of lockdown imposed on us by the government, how can we take ownership of our behaviour in such a way as to feel free, morally justified, and rational? Given what we know about the spread of the virus and the limits of our health service, what is the rule that we can make for ourselves?

Forget what we are being told we have to do or forced to do. Forget what everyone else is doing. What is the most rational and therefore most morally right thing for us to do ourselves? That will be different for each of us – for some it will be choosing to go into the office less or avoid the supermarket more; for others it will be swapping a glass of wine outside a crowded restaurant for a coffee in the park; or just picking up the phone a little more often to those who live alone.

But whatever it is, it should be as much as you can reasonably do and as much as you can expect those in your circumstances to also do. Most important of all, it is what you are choosing to do and for which you are taking responsibility.

Injecting this sense of autonomy and ownership into the dreary world of lockdown won't adjust our body clocks entirely; but it might just let a little light in.