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COVID-19 and Beyond: The Need for Copathy and Impartial Advisers

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ABSTRACT

After the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and corporations probably return to their pre-pandemic stances. Solutions to the world’s problems are sought from technologies and businesses, not from considerations of equality and well-being for all. This is in stark contrast with the pandemic-time situation. Governments listen to recommendations from expert advisers, most notably public health authorities, who proceed from considerations of equality and common good. I suggest that we should continue on this path when the pandemic has been conquered. Other crises are already ongoing – poverty, conflicts, climate change, financial bubbles, and so on – and we could use expert knowledge rather than interests and ideologies in dealing with them. To assist in this, I define a new kind of counsellor, impartial adviser, who is normatively motivated by a sense of copathy, and who takes into account all views, nice and not-so-nice alike. I illustrate the nature and ideological orientation of copathic impartial advisers by placing them on a map of justice and examining their relationships with the main political moralities of our time.

KEYWORDS

impartial – justice – advisers – copathy – sympathy
Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions concerning the proper use of moral and political theories in public decisions, their justification, and their communication. But what about after the pandemic, or after we have learned to live with? What role should views on justice and morality have in the rebuilding of economies and preparation for new crises? Should we accept and develop the health utilitarian approach that worked relatively well in some countries during the early confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic? Or should we shun away from its monomaniac obsession for health and normalcy, its discriminating operationalizations, or its blatant paternalism?

I suggest that we take a wider look at political moralities and try to define what qualities governmental and regional advisers should have to best serve societies. Politicians have their own partisan views and act from many motives, but those who counsel them could – and, I argue, should – rise above ideological disagreements and be impartial. Impartiality, however, is not a straightforward matter, and not the sole property of health utilitarians, although they, too, can claim a version of it. Furthermore, impartiality is not a middle or compromise view, tempting as the idea might seem. Taken to its logical conclusion, it is an extreme attitude and outlook, which excludes many other ways of thinking.

In what follows, I will first introduce a map of justice, which shows the similarities and differences of some main ideologies, or political moralities. This gives me a tool to predict where economies and societies will be directed after the pandemic. I will then go on to locate impartiality on the map, and describe the attitude, copathy, that would be the most natural mindset for impartial advisers. This takes a departure from health utilitarianism, retaining, however, the commitment to universal altruism that utilitarianism traditionally embraces. Other popular theories of justice do not share this commitment, but I will conclude by outlining how their best elements, too, could be consolidated with copathy as the ideal mentality of impartial advisers.

**Political moralities, their similarities, and their differences**

Most people agree that the core of justice is equality. We should treat one another with equal consideration, everybody who counts should count for one and no one for more than one, and all those affected by decisions should be heard, or at least accounted for, in making them. Beyond these relatively well-accepted tenets, however, interpretations on who or what counts and how they should be considered and why vary considerably.

In my map of justice, I distinguish three main dimensions, namely the private vs public control of means of production, local vs global interests, and positional vs universal norms and values. When these are set as opposites, the theories that appear on the map are neoliberalism vs socialism, communitarianism vs utilitarianism, and care and identity ethics vs the capabilities approach. Figure 1 presents these variables and doctrines and their locations on the map of justice schematically.
The theories of justice placed on the map in Figure 1 have some surprising differences and similarities.

The bottom left corner represents positional thinking, according to which values, norms, rights, and duties can vary between different groups. It is, for instance, the mother’s role to care for her children, but the children do not, at least for a long time, have a similar responsibility for the mother. Identity politics that focus on gender, sexuality, and relation to colonialism belong to the same corner. Their aim is the recognition of new oppressed groups. This view is in sharp contrast with communitarian nationalism just above it on the map, which is interesting, as they both emphasize identity. On the other hand, nationalism is also shunned by more liberal communitarians, although they both share the belief in the importance of spontaneously formed traditions.

When nationalists join forces with neoliberals, the result is the current regime in the United States, somewhere outside the top left corner of my map, if we scale it for reasonably predictable governments. But more moderate neoliberals can also form an alliance with utilitarianism. The doctrine of classical liberalism taught, and early heralds of corporate social responsibility thinking and their critics reiterated, that businesses producing a return to their stockholders eventually benefit entire societies by their apparently self-serving behaviour. Socialism at the bottom of Figure 1 deserves its place as an adversary of neoliberalism, although in political reality the space is perhaps currently occupied by a Chinese-type state capitalism as the opposite number of corporate capitalism.

Feminist thinking overcomes the division between positionalism and universalism with remarkable ease. Capability theorists are at home with second-wave or liberal feminism and see women and men sufficiently similar to warrant equal rights and opportunities for both. In the care and identity corner, a more natural fit is intersectional feminism, which stresses differences and the recognition of oppressed groups as themselves, not as reflections of a shared, neutral human essence (which in political practice tends to be abled-white-male-shaped). Collaboration between these is clearly possible, although their presuppositions concerning human nature are so wide apart. This presents something of a puzzle.
Compromises and the direction of global capitalism

The centre of Figure 1 has two main interpretations. It can be a place of either theoretical or practical compromises.

Theoretically, philosophers have suggested models that combine the strengths of the extremes while excluding their weaknesses. John Rawls with his theory of justice as fairness offered a quasi-contractual account which is neither neoliberal nor socialist, communitarian nor utilitarian, although nods are made into all directions. The premises include individual freedom, a modicum of material equality, a sense of justice that has a community ring to it, and strong leanings towards wellbeing in societies, as also desired by the (officially rejected) utilitarians.24 25 26 The rational decision maker behind the veil of ignorance is the key to justifying the Rawlsian arrangement.

There are, however, other contenders. Jürgen Habermas, in his communicative-action founded and deliberative-democracy advocating view,27 28 29 positioned himself in the middle by developing further the general-will and universal-reason informed views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau30 and Immanuel Kant.31 Non-dominated public discourse is the pivotal approach here, although lapses into a universally shared rationality occur both generally32 and in particular matters.33 Martha Nussbaum’s version of the capability approach apparently contains traces of Aristotelian, feminist, liberal, Marxist, and natural law ethics.34 35 36 In a recent development, the idea of liberal utilitarianism as a middle view has also been presented37 and discussed.38 39

The practical reading of the centre of Figure 1 starts with the observation that the six opposing and allying views of justice all give their own interpretations of equality, and in a sense leave the midpoint empty. The space is then occupied by real-life political compromises: parties, coalitions, and governments. Figure 2 presents the general situation in most liberal democracies on the map of justice.40

![Figure 2. Party political coalitions in liberal democracies on a map of justice](image-url)

The upper triangle represents right-wing parties, coalitions, and governments, whose economics lean towards neoliberalism and whose values can be conservative or liberal but not
diverse in the sense of care-and-identity ethics or radical as in utilitarianism. The lower triangle stands for left-wing and green parties, coalitions, and governments, whose economics are more socialist or social democratic and whose values can range from diverse to liberal but do not stray into the conservative or radical corners.

In liberal and social democracies with coalition governments, political parties are often in practice almost indistinguishable in the middle (although the distinction depicted in Figure 2 is loosely based on the Finnish regimes of 2015-2019 and 2019-). Decisions are made and agreements sealed based on interests more than ideologies. The differences, difficult to determine precisely, are not, however, my main point here. The more intriguing detail is the arrow that the right- and left-wing governments form towards universalism and (via the capability approach and its allies) towards primarily technological and business solutions to the world’s problems. It forms the basis of my prediction of developments after the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, or at least during its initial confinement period, governments could hide behind the health utilitarian arguments provided by epidemiologists and other public health scientists (see notes 3 and 4). In the height of a healthcare crisis, it is natural to concentrate on health and put other considerations momentarily on hold. But eventually choices have to be made concerning other values as well – economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental, to name a few.

Are we then, especially after the pandemic, going to turn the pre-pandemic globalization progress on its head and go for the happiness of the greatest number across borders, forgoing our national interests? This is highly unlikely, because if parties promised to do this, they would probably lose most of their voters (“party”, after all, implies that parts are taken). Or do we go for genuine nationalism, close our borders, and forget about globalization? There are attractions (more sustainable food production, attention to local values, less vulnerability in production chains) and threats (parochialism, setbacks to international collaboration on human rights and climate issues) in this approach, and some governments may be considering its advantages. Since, however, the world is run by multinational business corporations at least as much as by local governments, this, too, is unlikely.

The remaining alternative is to return to the pre-pandemic approach and follow the Enlightenment and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) path to further globalization, technological advances, consumerism, and perpetual growth. This is not necessarily a good choice, nor one that would be recommended by impartial advisers.

Global capitalism in a nutshell or why more of the same may not be the answer

Capitalism is an economic and political system that makes some people happy and others unhappy. The doctrine of classical liberalism taught that its driving force is growth. When populations and economies grow, more and more people will be happy, maybe at some point even the majority. Karl Marx believed that capitalism is such a strong force that it will make everyone happy, in a consumerist kind of way, before it meets the limits of technology and nature, after which the only resource to exploit is the workforce. It will be exploited, because the system cannot survive without perpetual growth, and alienation, class struggle and revolution will ensue.
Time ran out on Marx’s prediction, though, as capitalism met other, environmental boundaries. An early warning was given by the Great Horse Manure Crisis of London. In 1894, *The Times* announced that since horse droppings can be carted out of big cities only by horses, producing more droppings, “in 50 years, every street in London will be buried under nine feet of manure.” While this threat was averted by the invention and increased use of motorcars, gasoline, and oil, the solution brought us, in time, something even more alarming, namely climate change. And although some say that “sustainable development” will be a remedy to this, it is more than feasible that it is not, and that some people, even some currently “happy” ones, will be left in or thrown into the external darkness.

Technological and business solutions to the climate and other issues continue to be paraded, and they will be the way chosen by corporations and probably also by governments after the COVID-19 pandemic. That is the way that liberal democracies are developing, and the only alternative seems to be nationalism or some other type of parochialism. The problem here is the pattern. Technologies and businesses, under the auspices of corporate (Western) and state (China) global capitalism, create crises, the crises are solved by more of the same, and more crises are produced. Is there any way to break the pattern? Philosophical ethicists can only suggest that governments should seek better advice to allow us to get out of this vicious circle.

**Impartial advisers, sympathy, and copathy**

The better advice by almost impartial advisers during the confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic came from national institutes of public health. After the pandemic, we still face global crises: poverty, conflicts, climate, and the exploitation of human, animal, and other natural resources. Could we have similar national or international institutes for those? The institute of equal wellbeing? The institute of taking the climate change seriously? This may not happen, because a clear and present threat to us seems to be the only good motivator, and we do not perceive climate change as “clear and present” or as poverty a threat to “us” (say, the middle classes of liberal democracies). Impartial advisers might, though. Figure 3 outlines the background.
Almost everyone believes, in some sense, in the importance of equality, in the middle of Figure 3. Different values and beliefs draw, however, interpretations into different directions. The distinction that is relevant to my narrative sets apart the ideologies of the upper left and the lower right halves of the map. Impartial advisers inhabit the lower right.

On the left, intrinsic values include spontaneous communality, immaterial values, collectivity, and differences between groups or sections of people. On the right, the commitment is to the similar moral standing of all people (and maybe other sentient beings), autonomous choices by individuals, measurable goods, and the meticulous calculation and weighing of these goods as the basis of public decisions. The emphasis on private property or particular communities and sections renders the upper left side slightly egoistic. On the lower right, altruism has a firmer grip, as the creeds there stress universal inclusion, social responsibility, and equality of opportunity for all. The egoism-altruism distinction is not, however, either exact or rigid.

In considering the nature of our moral sense (something that I am encircling in my quest for impartial advisers), Shaftesbury wrote about the difference between egoism and altruism, “The Question wou’d not be, ‘Who lov’d himself, or Who not’; but Who lov’d and serv’d himself the rightest, and after the truest manner?” By saying this, he noted that the boundaries between ourselves and others are not so clear that anybody could optimally further their interests by completely disregarding others. Even universal happiness, or the happiness of the greatest possible number, can be a good goal for us, even if we are not that keen on the wellbeing of others as such.

Shaftesbury’s historico-philosophical context provides a further clue to finding the location of impartial observers on the map of justice. Most moral sense theorists assigned sympathy or some similar feeling the pride of place in their ethical doctrines. The values and beliefs that characterize different accounts of justice, depicted in Figure 3, help to detect which accounts would accept the idea of impartial advisers and which ones not. The situation is presented in Figure 4.
The mode of “feeling together” in the upper left half of the figure is selective solidarity. Nationalists sympathize with members of their nations, oppressed groups with their group members, and champions of private property with fellow champions of private property. All these can employ counsellors who promote the particular interests of the chosen group or section, but they would not normally hire advisers who would place the good of others before theirs. Health guidance can be acknowledged during health crises, but directives to ease the plight of outsiders or to avert climate change cannot.

Moving on to the interface between the two ideological camps, some care ethicists, some supporters of identity politics, and some capability thinkers can support impartial advisers, others cannot. This is a question of motivation, or the interpretation of the principle of “sympathy” in the middle of Figure 4. Those forms of identity politics that draw their strength from hatred towards other groups would probably not be amenable to impartial advice. Taking into account the objects of their hatred would not tally well with the rest of their views. The same goes for those forms of capability ethics that gain their motivation from disdain. By this I mean a (perhaps unconscious) resentment towards people who choose to live in their oppressed state instead of exposing themselves to the dangers of the more liberating routes.

This leaves three forms of sympathy to support impartial advisers. Care ethics contributes the kind of fellow feeling that can be described as loving the broken, the dependent, or the ones seeking their place like they are. The capability approach adds compassion that aims at making the broken, the dependent, and the ones seeking their place intact, independent, and at home with their surroundings.

From the utilitarian corner comes an attitude that has not had a name before but could be coined copathy. By this I mean a universal together-feeling that does not involve connections to guilt, shame, pity, love, hatred, or any other stronger feelings like them. Copathy, at least for me, is a calm sensation or realization that we are one with all other sentient beings, and that we should not by our actions or choices make their lot worse. With its allies based on the feeling of sympathy, this angelic intellectual irritation could recommend, for instance, climate action at the expense of our own momentary comfort (see note 37) or the abolition of the use of sentient nonhuman animals in industrial food production.45

Rescuing some values, rejecting others, and accepting responsibility for the residue

The history of philosophy knows many entities that resemble my copathic advisers. David Hume and Adam Smith’s impartial observer and judicious spectator, Immanuel Kant’s rational agent, Sigmund Freud’s superego, John Rawls’s individual behind the veil of ignorance, R. M. Hare’s archangel, and Ronald Dworkin’s judge Hercules are well-known examples.46 These are all decision makers who do not allow their emotions, personalities, or short-term self-interests get in the way of their judgement.

In real life, political advisers are different. On the lower right half of Figure 4, we can find care-oriented, development-oriented, calculating, and common-good-driven counsellors. They are all potential allies of the copathic impartial adviser, but there are certain caveats. The natural place for my advisers on the map of justice in Figure 4 is in the utilitarian corner. This is also inhabited by health utilitarians. Their approach is impeccable in its impartiality when it comes to individuals and groups. It is, however, committed to one value, health, at the expense of all
others, and hence axiologically partial. Similar considerations can be extended to care, development, and calculation ethicists, as well. They prioritise one value dimension at the expense of others, and this is not impartial enough for my vision. It leads to a situation in which the common good, an admirable aim when thought about abstractly, assumes concrete content that defies the idea of taking everybody into account.47

On the upper left half of Figure 4 counsellors put their own agendas first. In that section, we can find business lobbyists, neoliberal think tanks, nationalist or ethnic advisory groups, and gender and related organizations. These are not impartial at all and cannot be allowed to reign in a copathic world. But whatever they have to say must still be heard, just like the voices of the counsellors closer to my impartial advisers. It is a question of filtering the detrimental elements out and keeping the partisan but not harmful constituents.48 Impartial advisers should not let rashness, greed, racism, or gender rage influence their recommendations, but they should consider the points of view of legitimate risk taking, self-interest, national or ethnic pride, and concern for the oppression of one’s reference group. The task is difficult, but it is what genuine impartiality requires.

Another challenge is to avoid the biases reflected in the historico-philosophical models. Hume and Smith’s image is that of a country squire sipping sherry in front of a fire; Kant’s a highly virtuous rational man; Freud’s an internalized watchdog for societal norms; Rawls’s a male head of family on the Mayflower; Hare’s an impossibly knowledgeable archangel (in the Christian scriptures they are all men); and Dworkin’s an equally omniscient jurist called Hercules. As a result, the bias is towards male, norm-loving, law-abiding, prudentially self-interested, patriarchal know-it-alls who never err.

There are two main lessons to be learned from the qualities of the better-known contenders. The first is that we cannot hide our embodiment from the equation. The concept of copathy almost implies that impartial advisers could be non-corporeal (theological angels with no dimensions), but of course they cannot. In the further development of the model, this has to be addressed. The second is that assuming omniscience is all good and fine with theoretical models, but if impartial advisers are meant to be real people, the possibility of mistakes has to be admitted. This leads to my final consideration here, namely moral residue.

From time to time, all public decision makers make wrong decisions and all advisers, partial or impartial, give bad advice. When this happens, the solution is not to sack them at once, although it may seem tempting – send the right message, respond firmly, and so on. In the case of politicians, elections often lead to that result, for better and for worse. But if expert advisers admit their mistakes and take responsibility for the moral residue and we have some grounds to believe that they have learned from their mistakes, it would in many cases be suboptimal to get rid of their services. They may still be the best experts in their fields and replacing them with less knowledgeable counsellors would not be wise.

The Public Health Agency of Sweden and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic during spring 2020 is a case in point. Based on the Agency’s work, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell publicly professed, day in and day out for months, his faith in the lighter restrictions the country had chosen.49 He did not, however, ignore the challenges of the approach. He admitted relatively early on that the strategy had caused an unacceptable amount of deaths,50 and although he continued to defend the Agency’s approach,51 he also later conceded that with the knowledge they had a few months after the pandemic had hit Sweden, they would probably have given different recommendations.52 There is every reason to believe that this realization will make a
mark on the Agency’s mindset, and that they do feel the fallout of their counsel and, if not regret it, at least accept responsibility for it.

For my suggested copathic impartial advisers, the responsibilities would be even wider and deeper. The Swedish health utilitarian counsellors “only” had to worry about morbidity and mortality. Truly impartial advisers would also have to answer for other values and the indirect consequences of their instructions. Impartiality, as I pronounced in the beginning of this article, is an extreme view, against all other views. Can we concentrate on health? No, because there are other considerations. Can we concentrate on economy? No, because there are other considerations. Can we concentrate on care? No, because there are other considerations. And so on. We cannot even focus only on considerations that seem good, nice, kind, and reasonable, because there are bad, unpleasant, cruel, and senseless considerations that we have to take into account. Why? Because strict impartiality requires us to do so. If that is too much to ask, my proposal can be unacceptable. Be that as it may, I stand by my words and say that the world needs impartial advisers, motivated by copathy, and willing to absorb all the moral residue that would follow from listening to their counsel.

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