

The 11th Commandment

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Finding the “right” way to deal with the latest coronavirus pandemic has taken us on quite the rollercoaster ride, hasn’t it? Masks were a waste of time, we were told; now, we have to wear them. It was crucial to steer clear of your grandkids – for a while, at least; then it was fine to dandle them on your knee. Children were packed off to school for the longest time so their elders wouldn’t have to look after them; then the classrooms were closed, before suddenly re-opening – complete with “safety measures” this time (though there is precious little evidence of compliance with such measures in the playgrounds). Check for fever? No point – the super-spreaders are precisely the ones that exhibit no symptoms of the disease. Yet the Chinese take temperatures at every possible opportunity. An effective vaccine was a decade away at the earliest, clamoured a choir of experts (before shortening the wait to thirty-six months or less), but now a safe(?) and effective(?) nostrum is expected to turn up before the year is out; the Russians are already dispensing jabs willy-nilly (to military personnel and other menials who can’t put up a fight) in a kind of large-scale human experiment. Take a trip? We had no choice but to stay at home during the lockdown, of course; now we are free to travel again. However, an erratic quarantine regime has effectively hobbled people’s peripatetic urges, presenting a real threat to the economic recovery.

Those who prefer to know exactly what’s waiting for them round the corner will not be fans of the uncertainty created by such policy reversals, but these U-turns come as no surprise to the clear-eyed sceptic – current understanding of COVID-19 continues to be patchy, so it is difficult to judge the “right” steps to take. Things were all a little easier during lockdown: the ultimate aim then was to stop the spread, or at worst to slow it down. Now, in a phase where we have no choice but to live with the disease, we are obliged to think relatively and factor in economic or socio-psychological side-effects. This is an enormously complex task that is manifestly beyond the grasp of government bureaucracies charged with maintaining the appearance of security and instilling trust. In striving for such goals, the state often resorts to methods that spread fear, yet low mortality rates are slowly but surely pulling the rug from under such scare tactics and putting the panoply of powers accumulated by bureaucrats in the wake of the pandemic in acute peril. Having entangled itself in a Gordian knot of measures and countermeasures, the collective is clearly no longer able to contribute much to containment efforts; indeed it is threatening to subjugate us all in a regime of permissions and concessions that borders on the unbearable. “Lockdown” and “unlocking” imply a clean, binary process – a change followed by a switch back to the status quo ante. If only it were that simple. Beware of new mechanisms of repression!

It is high time for individuals to poke their heads over the parapet again. In crisis mode, the private citizen was pushed back to the socio-political last ditch of the household (“stay at home!”), but each of us must now emerge from the bunker and reconquer the world – despite the current coronavirus pandemic, which continues to rage, or its anticipated successors in the form of genuinely novel



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viruses. This is do-able. It will simply require one or two additional rules of engagement for human co-existence. One thing has become clear: whether COVID-19 or influenza, these types of viruses are transmitted via exhaled air. It appears the risk of infection decreases exponentially with distance between people, so every centimetre of separation has a price above rubies, as it were. After about a metre and a half – two arms' lengths, let's say – the risk of infection is minimal. An arm's length is a handy measure, as it is more or less globally applicable, unless you happen to be dealing with pygmies. It is no coincidence that people refer to a person's "personal space", meaning the perceived perimeter of a comfort zone; if someone oversteps it, we know instinctively that they are getting too close.

Those who wish to – or have to – get up close and personal with their fellow man will have to put their faith in mutual mask-wearing. A mask is essentially a cough and spit barrier that primarily protects those around you. There are plenty of situations in life where keeping people at arm's length is not an option – on public transport, in the cinema, or at a football match, for example – so our face coverings have become our constant companions, even in the Western world, accustomed as it is to the pursuit of liberty. Civilised individuals finding themselves at close quarters with strangers who choose not to wear masks should in future make their excuses and leave. They do not belong in such company.

But people are not creatures of distance; we long for the human touch from time to time – ideally without a mask. Skin-to-skin contact, a kiss on the cheek, a hug, a handshake; whether we care to admit it or not, this is precisely what we have been most missing since the outbreak of the pandemic. The warmth of physical contact, the soft squeeze of a tender hand, an inescapable shared glance – there is no substitute. Otherwise we get cranky. In addition to the rationally justified distancing rule, we will thus need a second rule, a sub-regulation – a moral injunction – that defines the correct way to "love our neighbours". Or, not to put too fine a point on it, that stipulates who can genuinely be close to us, and who not. We shall draw a veil over the precise details of what we do in unmasked proximity with our very nearest and dearest. That remains a private matter.

So we have to segregate. We must learn to distinguish between our neighbours and (horribile dictu) "strangers" – 250 years after the Enlightenment, which preached a rather different gospel: "Thy magic binds again/What custom has strictly divided/All people become brothers/Where thy gentle wing abides" (Schiller, Ode to Joy). But no, cosying up to random people on some enchanted evening as if they were family is simply not an option now, abiding wing or no abiding wing; it is virologically and epidemiologically far too risky, whether what humankind happens to be facing is the current COVID-19, some future strain of flu, or another microscopic menace entirely. We can no longer trot the globe with carefree abandon, calling in here today, there tomorrow, and living cheek-by-jowl with everyone we meet. If we do, the hard truth is that we risk morphing into human petri dishes for countless new pathogens, and a carousel of lockdowns and unlockings will become the new socio-economic normal.

The aim of this second "sub-regulation" must be to draw a rational and practicable distinction between "strangers" and "neighbours", and those who

wish to be close to us will need to tick the right boxes: they must not have had intimate contact with strangers over the last ten days (or will five days do, as claimed in Iceland?). It's as simple as that. The point is to sort the sheep from the goats, not by sex or race, but by their personal interaction with others over the last few days; anyone who has got too close to someone else – without knowing who they in turn have been getting close to – must keep their distance or don a mask.

But why might a moral commandment be what is required? In short, the collective, with all its executive power, should be involved as little as possible in people's intimate interactions with one another; it is hardly in a position to anticipate – and thus legislate for – possible future life circumstances or indeed exceptional situations of any kind. Weighed in the balance, the law is found wanting in the face of the infinite variety of routine existence. Making everyday life a matter for the courts – and for the criminal courts, no less – achieves little and undermines civic goodwill. We must call upon far more consequential means of social cohesion – propriety and morals.

Our Jewish-Hellenic notions of propriety and morality are based on societal models that (i) were inherently limited in respect of the numbers to which they pertained and (ii) discouraged mingling between tribes, towns and territories; the Ten Commandments were handed down to an isolated, extended family of nomads in the desert, and Aristotle's slightly more detailed Nicomachean Ethics were created when Athens boasted a polis of no more than 250,000 inhabitants. There may have been international trade, wars were certainly fought on an epic scale, and whole nations could spend years wandering vast distances in the wilderness, but the quasi-promiscuous commingling of peoples typical of our modern, globalised existence did not take place. In our new world, we need behavioural rules that apply at the most basic societal level – that of the individual and his immediate surroundings. It's not the viruses that are novel; they have been around in one form or another for ever. It's our manner of co-existing on this shrinking planet that has changed. Existing rules of propriety will have to be augmented with a distancing rule that, despite everything, still permits of proximity.

How might such a rule read? What about this as a draft commandment?

Thou shalt keep strangers at arm's length, yea, even unto respecting their personal space, and thy neighbour who dwelleth amongst strangers shalt thou spurn as a stranger, until he shall prove himself pure in the eyes of the Lord.

Or something along those lines – only better. All we'd need then is a Moses-style leader of indisputable authority or a moral arbiter of the calibre of an Aristotle.

The alternative to a moral approach to solving the COVID-19 crisis is at best a perpetuation of the regulatory rollercoaster and, in all likelihood, the miring of our previously free society in a morass of repressive rules foisted upon us by nit-picking bureaucrats. Given such a potential catastrophe, a little bit of extra moral fibre in our diet seems a small price to pay!

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