# An Ontological Argument against Mandatory Face-Masks

*Michael Kowalik*

## Abstract

Face-coverings were widely mandated during the Covid-19 pandemic, on the assumption that they limit the spread of respiratory viruses and are therefore likely to save lives. I examine the following ethical dilemma: if the use of face-masks in social settings can save lives then are we obliged to wear them at all times in those settings? I argue that by en-masking the face in a way that is phenomenally inconsistent with or degraded from what we are innately programmed to detect as human likeness, we are degrading the *social* quality of our relations. Drawing on my previously published proof that Self is socially reflexive (mutually mirrored) rather than monadic in its constitution, I conclude that any widespread en-masking is also deleterious to humanity and therefore unethical.

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There are many respiratory viruses in continuous global circulation that can be deadly, including several coronaviruses (Roussel, et al. 2020) and seasonal Influenza. Moreover, novel viruses with pandemic potential can emerge and spread before an effective public health intervention could be instituted. If saving lives by wearing face-masks is a valid normative principle and the risk of potentially deadly respiratory viral infections is always present, then we ought to wear face-masks at all times when in the proximity of others. Given that eyes, phenomenologically speaking, do not by themselves constitute a face, the said normative principle commits us to live in a world without direct face to face relations; we would not see any other faces, neither those of our children nor our parents, nor friends, unless those faces were mediated by a screen, phenomenologically denaturalised, and, in the process, alienated. We can intuitively imagine the consequences of living in such an extremely risk-averse world; for mental health, for human relations, for culture, for empathy, for love, for humanity, but we may nevertheless try to justify these negative outcomes on utilitarian grounds. After all, dying from a viral infection would also be a negative outcome. I argue that the utilitarian approach fails irrespective of the epidemiological benefits of mask-wearing *vis-a-vis* the magnitude of the threat; mask-mandates for social settings are not a rational or ethical solution to a medical problem, because they negate the reasons we care for human life in the first place.

One of the most replicated protocols in developmental psychology, the Still Face Experiment designed by Edward Tronick, examines the function of reciprocal face-to-face relations in child development (for a historical overview see Adamson & Frick 2003). The protocol became a benchmark for measurements of infant cognition and behaviour; infants find the absence of responsive facial expression more disturbing than other violations of normal social interactions. An infant, when faced with an expressionless mother, "makes repeated attempts to get the interaction into its usual reciprocal pattern. When these attempts fail, the infant withdraws [and] orients his face and body away from his mother with a withdrawn, hopeless facial expression." (Tronick, et al. 1975) Reciprocal face-to-face interaction with the primary care-giver affects brain development, promoting neural sensitivity to social cues that is "critical for understanding others' internal states, and thus for regulating social relationships" and "serving as a basis for the development of more advanced socio-cognitive skills". (Rayson, et al. 2017) In adulthood, our emotional states are determined more strongly by the facial expressions of others than by our own predisposition (Moore, Gorodnitsky and Pineda 2011), suggesting that social engagement is driven by reflexive face processing.

Phenomenologically, our sense of Self is grounded in the reflexivity (mutual mirroring) of face-to-face relations. As I have shown elsewhere, we can identify as I, as Self, only in terms of what we identify *with*, and we can rationally identify *with* only in terms of what we perceive to be a-like (Kowalik 2020). We are the likeness of Man, the universal face in which we recognise our humanity as the humanity of others, and vice versa. The ancient concept of *Anthropos*, 'one who is alike', 'of human likeness', is not merely a historical artefact but a profound, metaphysical insight. Unless I can compare my innate human likeness

to the likeness of another there is literally nothing *like* being me, because *being me* entails awareness that I am like someone else. The mask conceals our innate human-likeness from one another, and thus progressively, phenomenologically, disrupts the recognition of our common humanity. By erasing or en-masking the face in our social relations we are therefore degrading the *social* quality of those relations. Critically, relating face to face is a condition of ethical intuition: "The access to the face is lived in the ethical mode. The face, all by itself, has a meaning." (Levinas 1999, 104)

> "Directness of the face-to-face, a 'between us', already conversation, already dialogue and hence distance and quite the opposite of the contact in which coincidence and identification occur. But this is precisely the distance of proximity, the marvel of the social relation. In that relation, the difference between the I and the other remains. But it is maintained as the denial, in proximity which is also difference, of its own negation, as non-in-difference toward one another. Like the non-indifference between close friends or relatives. Being concerned by the alterity of the other: fraternity." (Levinas 1999, 93-94)

Your face is that which speaks to me, that sees me, that hears me; all these modes of reflexive communication occur simultaneously, in one embodiment, phenomenally unified and individualised as another Self. Conversely, my face is that which speaks of others, and sees others seeing me. If these signals were disjointed, emanated without a face, there would be no phenomenological unity to these distinct modes of information, no personhood. Ultimately, the face itself communicates, non-verbally, visually; it conveys those subtleties of expression that make us human *vis-a-vis* one another, barely perceptible but nevertheless crucially, innately meaningful. This reflexive recognition is perhaps detected subconsciously, as an instantaneous bond that we may honour (and thus be true to the kind) or violate (and thus negate our kind and, implicitly, our own agency).

Imagine a world without faces; inhabitants of such a world could not possibly develop language, meaning or purpose, because they would lack phenomenal individuality - a discernible, unified likeness-to-kind. If their sight and language were manifested via some other unified source then That source would be the totalising feature of their personhood, their Face. In essence, the face is just an apprehension of conscious agency, the phenomenal realisation of personhood, so it is almost tautologically true that without a face there is no personhood, no Self, therefore no social relations.

To be clear, it is not just the 'lack' of face to face interaction that is deleterious to self-consciousness, but the phenomenological *counterfeiting* of faces; the act of negation "of an identity that is already performatively constituted via reflexive-relating of an individual with *other* individuals, already actualised by others 'for me' as someone who shares the evolved capacities, commitments or other properties of my identity-grounding kind." (Kowalik 2020) Face-masks function as a proxy for personhood that is not true to the kind. By relating to others in a way that is phenomenally inconsistent with or degraded from what we are innately programmed to detect as human likeness, we are distorting and degrading our own, innate sense of self, our humanity, which is not individually self-sufficient but socially reflexive. By de-facing others, we dehumanise ourselves; by de-facing ourselves, we dehumanise others, and therefore also ourselves.

The crucial ethical question is whether it is right to dehumanise ourselves and others to some degree for fear of death. If without face-to-face relations we are not human, and given that humanity is the basis of all our value commitments, then without it nothing has value or value-oriented purpose. Under these conditions the alleged utilitarian purpose of reducing the risk of spreading germs is no longer rational. Another way, by dehumanising ourselves we negate precisely that which we are aiming to protect, our Human existence, therefore contradiction. Self-negating reasons cannot be normative, therefore cannot be ethical.

The phenomenological disruption associated with the widespread use of face-masks limits our apprehension of the dominant human features and thus progressively isolates and alienates us from one another. The abnormal en-masking, distancing and isolating routines are nevertheless advanced as something beneficial to our health on narrow utilitarian grounds, failing to take into account their negative ontological impact. If my argument is correct then face-mask mandates ought to be urgently abolished on the grounds that they are universally harmful to human agency and therefore inhumane.

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