

A Humanist Critique of Mandatory Face Masks

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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 moral dilemma: if the use of face masks in social settings can save just one life then are we morally obliged to wear them at all times in those settings? Drawing on insights from developmental psychology and phenomenology, I argue that an affirmative response would not be reasonable in light of what makes human life meaningful and worth living.

There are many respiratory viruses in continuous circulation other than SARS-CoV-2 that can be deadly. If 'saving just one life' by wearing face masks is a valid normative principle, and given that the risk of potentially deadly respiratory viral infections is always present, then we ought to wear masks at all times and everywhere. The said moral principle therefore 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. What would become of our children if they were deprived of this most direct, primal pathway of communication?

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 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 When these attempts fail, the infant withdraws [and] orients his face and body away from his mother with a withdrawn, hopeless facial expression."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 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 2017) In adulthood, our emotional states are determined more strongly by the facial expressions of others than by our own predisposition (Moore 2011), suggesting that social engagement is driven by reflexive face processing.

Phenomenologically, our sense of Self is grounded in the reflexivity 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 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 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)

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 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 his 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, therefore no social relations.

Human agency is not individually self-sufficient; it is continuously maintained via social reflexivity, where facial expression is the primary pathway of inter-human connection, recognition, and the phenomenological likeness-to-kind. To be alienated from face-to-face relations is to become non-human, inhuman - a force that screens-out, cancels, kills or negates the humanity of another without concern because it does not perceive the Other as another Self but only as an object, without human-likeness to Self, which thereby diminishes its own human-likeness and loses oneself. To have one's face erased by a mask, symbolically muted, prohibited from being seen, its expression de-faced, amounts to being dehumanised.

The crucial ethical question is whether it is right to dehumanise ourselves and others to some degree for fear of germs. 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, failing to take into account their negative sociological and psychological 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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