

A response to Questions of Ethics around the Covid-19 Vaccine

An important question to be asked at the time of pandemic morality is: are the moral standards used to evaluate action and inaction at the time of a global pandemic the same as those in times where no life-threatening pandemic exists? The answer to the question is as complex as the attempts to deal with the pandemic at any level is. There are no simple answers, and there are probably no clear-cut good or bad, right or wrong answers. In times of a pandemic, morality is judged by the primacy of the category of moral responsibility; what is the most responsible course of action at this point in time, given the circumstances we are living, and in view of the priorities we are cognisant of as the human community.

The moral evaluation of co-operation with evil structures, either remotely or proximately is important and underlies the support that we are called to give or withhold in our engagement with various products and services. To refrain from systems that perpetrate evil, even remotely, in normal circumstances is commendable and even recommended action and all people of good will, in good conscience are invited to take this stance. The call to abandon products produced by slave labour, services backed by 'dirty money', entities that are embroiled in corruption for example is a reminder of the call for ethical consumption of goods and services.

This invitation and indeed moral duty is important and cannot be easily dismissed. In 'normal'¹ circumstances. However, the above notwithstanding, in pandemic times there have to be extenuating factors that guide moral action.

Whilst the use of aborted foetuses in clinical vaccine trials is morally questionable, it is clear that the foetuses had not been aborted for the purpose of the trials. If that had been the case then the moral evil of the trials would be judged in the categories of wilful murder in the

¹ I do not have the capacity to determine what is normal anymore. Outside pandemic times, we deal with various other pandemics (social, economic, political) they have not been dubbed such but when one considers the widespread destruction and overreach of the consequences of human greed in these circumstances and how they touch the "pan – demos" (all people) one wonders whether such do not deserve to be called pandemics themselves, and thus the questions; do we have a 'normal'.

pursuit of science, a position that is not morally acceptable no matter the outcome. The fact that the aborted fetuses are used, without the need for trials as the predetermining the abortion, allows for moral excuse to be afforded the actions of science in the pursuit of good.

This merits the application of the principle of double effect wherein the action taken to promote a good has an unavoidable evil consequence. The action of producing a safe and effective vaccine, good as it may be, does in actual fact act negatively on the respect and the sacredness of human life and ‘dignity of the human body [which is] an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity’.² This particularly in the case of controversial bodies no less. In following with the principle therefore, whilst good is sought, there is an evil associated with the action. The fact that the evil exists does not mean that it is the primary goal, it is the unintended, unjustified, but associated accompaniment of the action.

Whilst the principle may be applied, it is important to keep in mind the dangers of oversimplifying it. The principle of double effect in its classical formulation takes into cognisance that the evil is an outcome of the pursuit of good, it is not the intimate walking companion in the process. The difficulty of the clinical trials of the vaccine is that what is judged to be evil in the process is an intimate companion in the process, even prior to the efficacy of the trials, that is before any good can be ascertained or confirmed with certainty. The fundamental question to answer therefore as regards the principle is whether it is applicable when the good to be sought is remote and uncertain.

A different approach would be to understand the primacy of pandemic ethics as the saving of as many lives as possible at the shortest space of time. The fact that the pandemic has terrorised the whole world for over 12 months now and that millions of people have died the world over and millions more are infected makes the saving of lives an ever more urgent task. The wartime moral principle of the responsibility to protect may be useful in dealing with the ethics behind the development of the vaccine. The human community has a responsibility to protect itself in the face of so much death and destruction. The responsibility is not a nationalist agenda but a humanitarian one and nations and in this case research structures that are best equipped to develop means to protect the human community have an urgent moral responsibility based on their positioning to protect the human family.

² [Instruction Ad resurgendum cum Christo regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation \(15 August 2016\) \(vatican.va\)](https://www.vatican.va/press-releases/2016/08/16-prs-2016-08-16-01-en.html)

In the framework of the Responsibility to Protect, there is an allowance of last resort measures which in war time contexts, or where crimes against humanity exists, the intervening party uses all means available, including military violence to promote the good envisaged and protect human lives. Pandemic ethics, in the ‘extremity’ of the circumstances, should allow for ‘last resort’ measures. In this space the use of aborted fetuses may be morally justified in view of the effort and assumed responsibility to protect.

Other considerations in pandemic ethics need to be highlighted. The primary motivations for actions should include but not be limited to, the saving of human life considered to be sacred and at the heart of all moral action; the promotion of the common good, which in itself envisages the security of a host of conditions where human life can find full meaning and expression; the option for the poor, which priorities the protection of the vulnerable in human society and in pandemic times we are in a sense all poor; solidarity, which behoves us to work together towards lasting solutions and to take care of one another despite the challenges of separatism and nationalism; subsidiarity, which calls for accountable and inclusive leadership in the search for enduring resolutions to the problems of our times.

Whilst the above discusses, albeit briefly, the problem of vaccine development and the moral framework to apply in the debate, I remain cognisant that there are many questions that remain and could be addressed with a more in-depth discussion of the issue. This serves merely to introduce the ideas I have.

Further questions need to be prioritised in a world where the term ‘vaccine hesitancy’ is a fast growing novelty. Whilst Pope Francis calls the tendency to refuse the vaccine ‘suicidal denialism’ others tend to think of it as their right to be ‘cautious’ in the face of what they consider to be dubious, unverified, under-tested vaccines. The science of the trials is obviously put into question, as remarks about political world domination, economic interests, and medical genocide continue to make the rounds. Pope Francis remarked that the taking of the vaccine is a moral duty and is less about the ‘I’ and more about the ‘We’, and he went to comment, ‘either we are all saved together, or no one is saved,’ the taking of the vaccine is a moral duty to protect one’s self and others.³

A question of conscience should be whether one accepts the risk of taking a ‘potentially’ lifesaving vaccine, or to take chances with a virus that has been proven to be severely mortal. The risks should be understood not be individual, in line with the pro-choice statement, ‘my

³ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-01/pope-francis-interview-canale5-pandemic-abortion-us-congress.html>

body, my choice.’ The decision of whether to or not to take the vaccine is inherently a community decision. Covid-19 has served as a stark reminder of the eternal truth that ‘no one is an island.’ The actions and interactions of people have led to the spread of COVID-19. It has led us to the recesses of what is uncharacteristically human, i.e. ‘isolation.’ If human life is to take on its rightful meaning and be true to its nature, it has to break the precipice and inhibitions of the isolated life and engage in community building, and inherent sociability.

There is an important task wherein we all have to realise that to regain humanity, we have to embrace the ideas of the common good that guarantee the well-being of the individual while at the same time prioritising the welfare of the community. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, an oft repeated phrase to stop the spread of the virus has been ‘herd immunity.’ The urgent medical task is to ensure that as many people are vaccinated in order to minimise the carnage. This can only be achieved if free-will is guided by moral responsibility.

In the unfortunate circumstance where the efficacy of the vaccines and their long terms effects cannot be satisfactorily guaranteed at such an early stage, it is important, indeed a moral duty, to err on the side of caution. Vaccine hesitancy would only delay the restoration and healing. At worst taking the vaccine and yielding undesirable results would give ethicists content for the double effect principle, at best, it may save humanity.

There is a moral responsibility to protect humanity from a pandemic that has brought about a crisis of such magnitude. One has to note that in the face of the crisis the duty cannot be delegated nor delayed. To do nothing as the hesitants, denialists and armchair caution critics do would lead to no change and countless deaths and infections, a situation that is deplorable. In the wisdom of Bonhoeffer, to do nothing is in itself a cooperation with evil, a moral position to be abhorred. Catholics and indeed all people of good-will have a moral duty, an urgent one at that, to save lives, no matter how small the discomfort.