

The Big Deal About Masks

What's the big deal about masks? In exchange for slight inconvenience and discomfort, we save lives. Basic human selfishness explains why many would fail to comply. Anti-authoritarian scruples might lead some to oppose government mask mandates. But how could anyone sincerely disagree with the principle that wearing masks is a good thing?

The obvious place to start is: Almost no one thought that wearing masks was a good thing before Covid-19. Yet contagious respiratory diseases that kill have been around longer than humans. So if the "In exchange for slight inconvenience and discomfort, we save lives," argument were airtight, we should have been wearing masks all along – and should plan on doing so forever. Which seems crazy.

You could reply, "That's a straw man. The real argument is that masks pass a cost-benefit test." If so, that leaves anti-maskers with two obvious margins to think about.

1. *The degree of effectiveness.* The most popular version of this objection is that masks *don't* save lives. But once you start doing cost-benefit analysis, it is sufficient to claim that masks don't save *enough* lives. The evidence from Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) is surprisingly supportive of this position. (And if you deem the RCTs subpar, please join me in calling for large-scale Voluntary Human Experimentation to settle the question once and for all). Ultimately, however, I still suspect that masks reduce contagion by 10-15%.

2. *The degree of inconvenience and discomfort.* Many people plainly don't much mind wearing a mask. But despite Social Desirability Bias against convenience and comfort, plenty of others plainly *do* mind. Since we're doing cost-benefit analysis, the key question is: How bad is mask-wearing for the *average* person?

Nothing good googled, so I ran this Twitter poll.

Holding duration equal, wearing a face mask is X times as uncomfortable as wearing a seat belt.

X is...

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan_caplan) February 5, 2021

Millions of people bet their lives every day to avoid the discomfort of wearing a seatbelt, yet the median respondent considers masks far more uncomfortable. Furthermore, note

the long right tail of people who find masks *massively* worse than seatbelts.

The upshot is that we are not talking about saving hundreds of thousands of lives per year by making the average person 1% worse off. We are talking about saving tens of thousands of lives per year by making a quarter of the population miserable.

On reflection, however, this simple analysis overlooks a major factor. A veritable elephant in the room. Namely:

3. *The degree of dehumanization.* Personally, I only find masks marginally uncomfortable. But I hate wearing them, and I dislike being around people who wear them. Why? Because a big part of being human is showing other people our faces – and seeing their faces in return. Smiling at a stranger. Seeing your child laugh. Pretending to be angry. Seeing another person’s puzzlement. Masks take most of those experiences away. At the same time, they moderately reduce audibility. Which further dehumanizes us. How many times during Covid have you struggled to understand another person? To be heard? Indeed, how many times have you simply abandoned a conversation because of masks? I say the dehumanization is at least five times as bad as the mere discomfort. And if you reply, “Want to see other people’s faces and hear other people’s voices? Just Zoom!,” I will shake my head in sorrow that you’re dehumanized enough to say such a thing.

Am I just being a big baby about this? I think not. Suppose humanity could eliminate all disease by wearing bags over our heads forever. Would you be willing to go through life not seeing the faces of your children? Would you want your child to go through life not seeing the faces of their friends? Well, during Covid we’ve moved at least 25% in that dystopian direction. The word “hellscape” is not out of place. I’ve never been a fan of the veiling of women, but I had to live through Covid to realize how horribly dehumanizing the custom really is.

What if the choice was between masks and a 50% annual chance of death? The reasonable reaction would probably be, “Fine, we’ll be severely dehumanized, but we’ll survive. Just like war. I guess I’ll take it until a better deal comes along.” When the choice is between masks and a 0.5% annual chance of death, however, the reasonable reaction is rather, “I’ll take my chances and live like a human being.” Indeed, once you’re old enough, even a 50% annual chance of death starts to look like a good deal. My considered judgment: If another Covid strikes when I’m 80, I do not want my grandchildren to wear masks around me. I want to enjoy their laughter while I still can.