

What You and the Pandemic Virus Have in Common

What can the COVID-19 virus teach us about philosophy?

With any virus – but particularly with an especially infectious one – we get a perfect working metaphor for the relationship between individual actions and society.

Namely: the only thing that spreads as far and as fast as a pandemic are the consequences of your moral actions.

If you contract a virus – say, for instance, the COVID-19 coronavirus – you immediately become a member of a great chain. Someone before you had the virus. Now you have it because of them. And more likely than not, someone else – multiple people, really – will have it because of you. When you become a carrier for a virus, everything you do becomes a potential vector for infecting people. And you alone can infect hundreds or thousands of people if you do things badly enough.

As a member of a chain of infections, though, your contribution to a pandemic can be far worse than just infecting a dozen or a hundred or a thousand other people. Those people you infect aren't just sick because of you – they're carriers too because of you. They can now infect dozens or hundreds or thousands more.

It is in this way that a single human being – a “patient zero” – can be responsible for infecting hundreds of millions or billions of people.

This viral example brings home the significance not just of personal hygiene but of all personal ethics and personal action. We live in networks and chains, and all of our actions “transmit” something to the people around us. If we transmit fear, that fear “infects” the people around us, then the people around them. If we transmit

These networks are how an abusive father's actions can lead eventually to mass prison camps, or how a friend's faithfulness can lead to the defeat of a great tyrant. The content of our actions transmits virally, and at scale it can become something very dangerous and destructive, or beautiful and healing.

Take time during this time of pandemic to reflect on the vast significance of your own actions and your connectedness to others – not just in health, but in everything.

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