

# What Is COVID-19 Teaching Us About Being Human?

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Grocery aisles stand devoid of toilet paper rolls, paper towels, meat, and canned products as panic-stricken urbanites stock their pantries and garages to avoid multiple trips to the supermarket, or maybe even to avoid doomsday scarcity. When people do visit such stores, they quickly part, skirt, and dart away from each other—social distancing is something we Americans are quite adept at, we have always liked our private spaces, we have always been studious about not encroaching physical and emotional spaces of our fellow humans leaving such “encroaching” behaviors to doctors and shrinks. We have preferred to live in the suburbs where more distant our homes are from our neighbors, the more valuable our property has been. As a civilization, we Americans have associated happiness and well-being with the accumulation of stuff, protection of private property, and the defense of our individuality. President Trump has applauded Americans for doing really well in taking social distancing seriously, and yet, more recently, under pressure from the ruling class, he also announced that America will be open for business soon. For the first time in recent history, the two key concepts of individual liberalism are in conflict with each other: individual freedom clashes with the pursuit of happiness.

Irrespective of political policies towards migrants, border porosity, women’s reproductive rights, international relations, war, the Middle East, etc., the heart and soul of Western liberal democracy has always been individual freedom and self-interest. Bentham and Mill had laid out clearly that the theory of life based on individual self-interest is utilitarian where utility refers to the ability of an object to promote pleasure and happiness. Happiness is the experience of pleasure and the absence of pain. Therefore, pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends. All desirable things are desirable because there is pleasure inherent in them, or they are a means to promote pleasure. To be an individual is to be an owner of one’s own capacities and what one acquires through the use of those capacities. The stuff that is acquired is understood as private property, which are commodities that are inherently pleasurable. Ownership as the essence of individuality and freedom means independence from others, and one is considered to be ‘free’ from others when one is allowed to own and use her private property. Ayan Rand’s *The Virtue of*

*Selfishness* proposes an “objectivist ethics” that is based on “rational-selfishness” as opposed to the “brotherhood of men.” For Rand, altruism is “moral cannibalism” based on the premise that happiness of one member of society is predicated on the sacrifice of another. Thus, taxing the rich and subsidizing college loans involves punishing the rich, hence irrational morality imposed by a government will cannibalize rational and productive members of society.

Selfishness implies rationality and is the source of all happiness, and freedom, peace, prosperity in a benevolent and civilized society. This happiness which is the foundation of human good includes consumptive functions and also emotional functions, both of which can be acquired through the exchange of value (pursuit of profit through transaction). Of course, all this is inspired by the guru of self-love, Adam Smith, who argued that it will be hard to depend on benevolence of each other, rather, one must appeal to self-love of others and demonstrate to them that it is in their self-interest to help others. Within liberal morality, the concept of freedom is essentially negative, that is, it is usually seen as ‘freedom from’ rather than ‘freedom to.’ Freedom is a state of being in which one is *not* restricted, *not* compelled, *not* interfered with. The state is seen as a primary institution of restriction, interference and compulsion, therefore, the liberals have always obsessed about the freedom from control by the state.

In the context of the current COVID-19 outbreak, the mad scramble to stockpile toilet paper, meats, and kitchen towels, therefore, represent freedom to pursue happiness and avoid pain through rational self-interest. Sheathes of paper, piles of meat, and cans of baked beans represent ownership of stuff/property that promote freedom and pleasure, and hence, independence from others in freely pursuing individual hygiene, and satisfying carnal cravings. Mad dashing towards the grocery aisles represent our instinctual transactional essence for pursuit of happiness by deferring the pain of crisis (absence of such stuff). Social distancing instantly makes sense for most Americans because suddenly, the freedom to not be interfered with, or the penchant for alienation and isolation, is now medically desirable. The failure to socialize is no longer an antisocial personality disorder, the obsessive love for isolation is no longer a medical condition, depression due to alienation is suddenly self-preservation because, apparently, we are faced with an existential question where the pursuit of individuality is now a societal necessity. We should do really well and seamlessly cope with the COVID-19 crisis because resistance to it involves what we are well versed in: the pursuit of individual self-interest.

Yet, contradictions manifest, with schools closed and daycare centers seen as too social for safety; families must, often for the first time, actually look up from their cell phones and engage with their children who can no longer be let loose on nannies, in playgrounds and malls. We are therefore forced to take stock of, perhaps for the first time, how much work the minimum-wage employed migrant nanny puts into our kids. As school teachers inquire after our kids and diligently send pictures, online homework, and conduct classes on Zoom, we are compelled to realize how much space and time the school teachers create in our lives so that we can pursue our lucrative careers and spend hours at the gym. In the midst of lock-downs and stay at home orders, we as a society must come to terms with what hundreds of nations go through every day under conditions of war and state sanctions imposed by the U.S. We as a “host society” must also come to terms with what migrants and refugees must go through in the absence of basic hygiene and food in their existential crisis of finding a safe haven.

In the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis there were reports from refugee shelters in Europe complaining that toilet seats were broken every day because Muslim migrants did not know how to use western toilets as they are used to squatting on holes on the ground. Orientalist imaginations bordered around Islamophobia as the migrant’s body and her daily hygiene was deconstructed as an act of defilement of western norms. In the midst of disappearing toilet paper rolls and the use of substitutes like kitchen towels leading to clogging of toilets, perhaps the coronavirus is teaching us

to 're-orient' our cultural tropes of western modernity, and pushing us to place ourselves in solidarity and empathy with the 'refugee-other.'

Protesters demonstrated in front of Wall Street holding signs "we will not die for Wall Street" as President Trump claimed that social distancing would be eased to revive the economy. Profit must be pursued and the 'wealth of nations' must be accumulated in order to avoid a national and global economic crisis, but what would that mean for individual self-interest if working means contracting the virus? If, in the true spirit of liberal capitalism, the state may not subsidize individuals by paying salaries and sick leaves in the midst of this crisis because individual freedom is about freedom from control of the state, then profit-making must clash with the pursuit of happiness as pursuing profit (work) would mean irrationally sacrificing personal health.

The COVID-19 crisis holds up a mirror to our souls: what does it mean to be a rational human now? What does it mean to pursue happiness in a world where we hang between happiness and pain? Will society be the same again post-pandemic? What kind of society do we want? Indeed, the world never goes back to where it was for an Afghan child that loses a leg in a war deployed landmine embedded in his backyard. The world never goes back to where it was for a Syrian refugee that loses a baby while crossing the seas, or a Mexican migrant that loses his child while crossing the desert. They all pursue happiness and self interest in scrambling for liminal spaces between life and death. The spaces of the empty shelves in the grocery isles with disappearing toilet paper and their rationing (some stores are selling limited amount to each consumer) perhaps pale into comparison with the plights of scarcity of food and medicine experienced by war torn people, and lives lived in tents in refugee shelters, but the spaces of the supermarkets do open a revolutionary moment for a paradigm shift in self-love.

Crisis and contradictions force us through difficult liminal spaces to propel societies in new directions: we could choose more paranoia and the geopolitics of fear as we did post-September 11, or we could choose to pursue a different kind of happiness and pivot our desire for a new kind of freedom where we ration to redistribute food, medicine, education for all just like we have consented to rationing of toilet paper in this crisis. We can pivot to a new kind of society where we allow maternity relief for fathers and mothers of all income brackets when life-changing events, like when a new baby is born. We can choose to be more empathetic in cultural and hence policy construction of the 'migrant other' and her way of life and sense of self as she yearns for a safe haven here. We can rethink the wages of our caregivers and teachers, making them truly represent the value of the work they do. We can choose to understand that social distancing is an extreme event, a calamitous condition, not a way of life that nourishes the self or society. It is in our self-interest that we rethink the human condition because the corona virus is holding up a mirror and showing us how much, and to what extent, our happiness depends on each other's happiness. Happiness of one member of society is predicated on the happiness of another even if it means a little sacrifice for all of us, this is not moral cannibalism, this is a pursuit of happiness based *not* on the accumulation of stuff, but on the expansion of positive freedom to depend, rely, and interact with each other as human beings.