

An Analysis of Moral Factors Regarding the Use of Masks during COVID-19 Pandemic: An Understanding Based on Dewey's View

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Abstract

During the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the correct use of masks, as an effective protective means, was recommended by public health institutions. However, it was found in real life that this suggestion might be ignored, which cannot be simply summarized as an “immoral behavior” or “irresponsible attitude”. The author attempts to make a theoretical analysis by combining the above phenomenon with the view on moral factors proposed by John Dewey, a famous American educator. It is believed in this paper that whether masks are used or not is affected by a variety of moral factors at the levels of individuals, society and countries. Various forces should be coordinated to encourage people to take a rational, responsible attitude toward the use of masks during this pandemic.

Keywords

Dewey, Moral Factor, Mask, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2019, has affected our lives as the most important public health event in recent years. Among the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) on the public response to this pandemic, the correct use of masks is recommended as a link included in the comprehensive measures to curb COVID-19 transmission and save lives: Make wearing a mask a normal part of being around other people. The appropriate use, storage and cleaning or disposal of masks are essential to make them as effective as possible (WHO, 2019). However, we will find in real life that some

people are always not willing to follow this recommendation; instead, they have their own values, judgments and reasons. Some explanations for this personal willingness have been tentatively proposed from the perspectives of psychology, anthropology, sociology or even nursing science in academic circles. This paper will, by starting from Dewey's research on the moral factors existing in Western society, propose an understanding of the moral factors regarding the use of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic based on Dewey's view. This way of understanding is to consider the moral understanding behind people's actions as a choice affected by three independent factors, each of which has its specific reasons and limitations. Also, the three factors constitute an uncertain or conflicting moral situation. People's moral understanding is the pursuit of moral certainty proposed based on the analysis and judgment of such an uncertain situation. The reason why we choose to study from Dewey's philosophical perspective is because Dewey believed that these different and even conflicting moral views can coexist, and various moral factors in society can also coexist. If we can accept this view of coexistence, we will want to explore the moral justification and value of each view itself from a holistic and comparative perspective. There has even been an anti-mask protest movement in Canada, some of the core ethical reasons include: a crisis of confidence in the government and the media, skepticism about inconsistent medical advice, protests against restrictions on individual freedoms, concerns about vaccine side effects, and more (Hapuhennedige, 2020). Of course, there are also specific ethical reasons for wearing masks correctly according to standards. Dewey's doctrine of the moral factor gives hope in our attempts to understand this conflict.

Traditional moral views do not consider the internal conflict but focus on the value issue. Views on values can be found in both rule ethics and virtue ethics, such as the idea of good and evil and their conflict. The conflict mentioned here is not inherent in moral theories but an idea derived from logical moral theories. However, Dewey soon realized that logically consistent issues are not available in our daily experience. For example, in terms of the public response to the use of masks during the pandemic, some people would be quite resistant to this behavior because it is considered by them to be more determined by social needs rather than effectiveness. Someone considers the use of masks as a sign of weakness and disease. And some others argue that the mandatory use of masks infringes on personal freedom. According to a survey conducted in Canada, only 58% of the respondents said they wore masks in public in the early period of the pandemic (Hapuhennedige, 2020). Moral agents' refusal to the use of masks would be considered to violate the epidemic prevention recommendations based on public health research during the pandemic, the interests of moral agents, others and the public may be endangered. However, the refusal cannot be simply summarized as moral "evil". Dewey holds the belief that this just shows the complexity of "good". It is precisely due to the fact that people's moral life is dominated by a single principle, which does not involve uncertainty. Conflict is

an external thing that exists in the nature of things. Thus, things beyond the moral principles we adhere to can also be “evil”, which can be frequently seen in the debate of modern social media. People often take pleasure in defending their moral choices and point out that those holding different views are “evil” in their moral choices.

Dewey introduced this external conflict into his situation theory. The conflict of external performance is inherent in the moral situation. The purpose of the exploration is to recognize that conflict is the inherent essence of the moral situation rather than replacing one conflict with another. “The essence of the moral situation is an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (Alexander et al., 1998). Thus, moral knowledge is shifted from people’s evaluation and judgment based on philosophical theories to practical issues under the moral situation. The moral situation, as the precondition of practice, is divided into two types in the history of traditional philosophy, which represent two independent elements of morality itself.

2. Greek Model

The first is the “Greek model”. In terms of the origin of Greek moral philosophy, the model has always maintained an idea about the purpose. The debate about the ultimate purpose of the universe has been mentioned in Democritus and Epicurus’ theories. This ultimate purpose is integrated with the purpose of real life to form a comprehensive purpose system. The sorting is based on the value grade of the purpose. This ubiquitous purpose theory has affected the Greek moral theory, “The most-celebrated account of teleology was that given by Aristotle when he declared that a full explanation of anything must consider its final cause as well as its efficient, material, and formal causes (the latter two being the stuff out of which a thing is made and the form or pattern of a thing, respectively).” (Teleology, 2015). The ego is generated when the causes and consequences are carefully reflected on and the purpose comes out. Then, the purpose-based form is manifested as the object of good due to satisfaction with the desire. Good is related to the careful consideration of wishes and purposes to some extent. We should promote the rationalization of behavior by taking the purpose into consideration. The purpose is usually accompanied by people’s psychological factors and activities in which one of the most important factors is the generation of an interpretation of meaning, especially the social significance of individual behavior.

During the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic, people took their purposes and wishes seriously and would take the initiative to view the purpose or the path to the purpose of achieving good purposes from the perspective of experience or causality. For example, when establishing the good purpose of “wearing masks helps us resist infection” from our inner mind, we will explore how to correctly wear masks. A statement issued by the WHO during the 2009 Influen-

za A (H1N1) outbreak (WHO, 2009). If masks are worn, proper use and disposal is essential to ensure they are potentially effective and to avoid any increase in risk of transmission associated with the incorrect use of masks. Oppositely, the incorrect way to use masks adds to the possibility of infection. However, it is often found in our real life that the public has not formed the habit of correctly wearing masks, and the behavior of the use of masks is simply out of psychological dependence. At this time, from the perspective of purpose, wearing masks does not constitute a certain moral good, as opposed by Dewey.

Nevertheless, the purpose will also give birth to other identification and behaviors. The public refused to wear masks on the ground of personal freedom during the prevalence of the pandemic, which is a problem of personal value orientation in essence. Since the purpose is often accompanied by a strong sense of self-awareness, it is quite easy for individual values and awareness to differ greatly. Even, people who refuse to wear masks for personal freedom are also supported by research data. In May 2020, a study from Norway showed that ten out of 100,000 people were infected in Oslo per week. If one million people had been forced to wear masks, only four cases would have been infected (Iversen et al., 2020). Is the social value of sacrificing personal freedom really worthwhile? In addition to personal value orientation, there are also problems with people's trust and belief. For example, ever-changing government orders would also arouse people's suspicion. Also, as a consequence, a considerable proportion (10%) of people would not believe in the role of masks. A higher percentage of people who believed masks did not have a place in society (42%), men (35%) and higher income respondents (34%) agreed with the statement there is social pressure in my community to wear a mask (Bir & Widmar, 2021). Donald Trump, the former president of the United States, even claimed that wearing masks is a sign of weakness. Although most people would choose to wear masks according to the norms of public health in real life, the balance between social value and personal value should also be highlighted and considered. The purpose brings reflection on individuals and personal interests. To some extent, modern moral values involve the development of social values under the guidance of individuals and personal values.

3. Roman Model

The second is the "Roman model", a moral theory system closely related to the moral norms of the law. In this model, rationality rather than mankind's purpose lies at the center of our life. Rationality, also expressed in a form of a mandatory force, participates in the actions to maintain ourselves and our life order. Offices, duties, relationships not of means to ends but of mutual adaptation, reciprocal suitability and harmony, became the centre of moral theory (Alexander et al., 1998). In Dewey's opinion, people always have their unique purposes. Morality, as a social rule, is designed to coordinate these purposes, which demand others based on self-interest. In the view of the proposer, the self-interest

stance is usually considered a process that serves as a purpose, but for the proposed object or the acceptor, this sometimes appears somewhat arbitrary, unless it also happens to meet his/her interests. A series of provisions or some systems will be formed through mutual requirements and coordination. These must possess the characteristics of reciprocity, and rules will be born. Rules are accompanied by the concepts of rights and obligations; rights mean that people's demands have been recognized, and obligations mean that people should meet specific requirements for recognition. Born with the rules, the principle of authority responds to people's requirements according to social permission.

During the prevalence of this pandemic, this rule-based model turned to the discussion on people's rights and obligations and emphasized the due legal responsibilities of people in countries where stricter social administration is imposed, which is more typical in East Asian countries. Although some countries have not issued orders and related guidelines on the mandatory use of masks, this does not mean these countries have not proposed normative requirements and guidelines. According to the survey results of YouGov, a British public opinion survey company, the highest proportion of people in Asian countries wears masks, even 92% in Singapore (Lupton et al., 2021). All these are closely linked to the principle of authority followed in Asian countries, and this psychological habit is even preserved among Asian immigrants in Western countries.

Under this model, people should emphasize the discussion on the relationship between rights and obligations, as well as the resulting rules. In this regard, Mill once proposed the "principle of injury", which was included in the ethics of public health, i.e. only acts that cause harm to others can be conquered or prohibited by public opinions (Mill, 1859). This is not out of purpose but the right of others not to be hurt. The basic rights similarly discussed also include people's natural and survival rights. The development and practice of the rights theory constitute an important part of the development and practice of modern Western moral theory. Some ethics experts in public health have proposed the right to wear masks for the purpose of self-protection according to the development of the rights theory (Akabayashi et al., 2022). This right is based on an evident naturalistic law, i.e. people have the right to take necessary measures to protect their life and health interests without causing harm to others. A key issue encountered in the discussion of rights and obligations is the legitimacy of government intervention. Some people would also raise the issue of the right to refuse to wear masks, which is a real problem. However, it is still an investigation of people within the scope of rights and obligations in the Roman model, without deviating from this inquiry paradigm. In some countries with strong government authority, such as China, wearing masks has become a political hotspot (Lu et al., 2022), which is not the same case in other countries, because it has almost become a legal obligation. When some people refuse to wear masks in public places, the parties concerned and the persons responsible for the places may be punished to a certain extent.

4. British Model

The third is the “British model”. Relative to the universal purpose in the Greek moral theory and the practice of social authority impact in the Latin moral theory, the so-called “British model” proposed by Dewey is not generally discussed. It refers to the British moral theory which is supported and opposed by society, such as the sympathy theory in Hume’s moral theory, which is a typical moral theory based on the psychological connection and reaction between people. This reaction theory: Individuals praise and blame the conduct of others; they approve and disapprove; encourage and condemn; reward and punish. Such responses occur after the other person has acted, or in anticipation of a certain mode of conduct on his part (Alexander et al., 1998). For instance, the sympathy mentioned above and the dissatisfaction caused by sympathy constitute the main source of morality. From the perspective of the moral subject, this theory lies between the two theories above. If the moral subject rationalizes his/her behavior by considering the purpose, it is mainly the relationship that occurs in self-consciousness while the recognition of social rules emphasized by the moral subject is the relationship that occurs between the self and the public system. So, the British model reflects the sensitivity to the reaction between individuals or the reaction from others within a certain relationship.

Dewey set examples like the prohibition order of alcoholic beverages advocated by the American government. Although drinking was officially banned, the society or small group in which people stay proposed different views on drinking. In Dewey’s words: Thus the scheme of rational goods and of official publicly acknowledged duties in Anglo-Saxon countries stands in marked contrast to the whole scheme of virtues enforced by the economic structure of society (Alexander et al., 1998). To put it simply, in English-speaking society, in addition to the purpose or social rules for moral judgment and evaluation, people also rely on their mutual reactions to each other for moral judgment and evaluation.

However, the emphasis on the reaction between people’s relationships can be easily manifested as the politicization of problems. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of mask wearing (or not) has become fairly politicized in the U.S. (Akabayashi et al., 2022) Some research experts indicated that if we need to promote the universal acceptance of public health concepts and then translate them into effective actions based on mutual reactions, we should provide effective, correct and logical information to the community, by contrast, contradictory messages early in the pandemic about who should wear masks have contributed to ongoing confusion and distrust (Hapuhennedige, 2020). In English-speaking countries, people should attach importance to both the accuracy of the information communicated to society and the community where people live and the reaction aroused by this information in the community, which also affects people’s moral judgment and evaluation of things or behaviors. Facial coverings (masks) reduce the risk of disease spread but there is li-

imited understanding of public beliefs regarding mask usage in the U.S. where mask wearing is divisive and politicized (Bir & Widmar, 2021). The fundamental reason for this splitting and politicization is the different values and choices that exist in the community. The formation and effectiveness of these views involve complex reasons, which may be related to personal experience, awareness of diseases/risks, moral sense, trust in public institutions, traditional customs and culture, etc.

Dewey believed that the three models represent three elements that play a role in social life, moral judgment and moral practice. These elements are independent but closely related to each other. No society can play a role through a single element as the overly simplified picture of moral life does not exist and can only prove the unexplainable gap between theory and real life. We recognize the existence of the three elements or the complexity and diversity of situations in people's real life. The solution to problems encountered by individuals in this situation is related to the factors that people need to pay full attention to under specific situations. Although specific moral elements or models will play an even greater role in societies, problem raising and solving remains the situation where the existence of all elements should be taken into account.

These factors constitute uncertainty and conflict in the moral situation. This conflict is the essence of the moral situation or the conflict between forces that lack shared standards. From the logic of individual and social actions, we should coordinate these conflicts and make necessary judgments and choices. It is precisely because of these conflicting factors that activities that contain the possibility of various choices also exist, "morals has to do with all activity into which alternative possibilities enter" (Alexander et al., 1998). The factors of these conflicts as well as all possible activities accompanied by the conflict factors require people to take a responsible attitude or a deliberate action, which is moral behavior in the sense of Dewey. Also, due to the existence of possibility, Dewey pointed out: "all moral judgment is experimental and subject to revision by its issue" (Alexander et al., 1998), which leads to Dewey's experimental epistemology in which tools and practical colors are used.

In the today when the COVID-19 pandemic prevails, we re-examine Dewey's more than one hundred years of theory of moral factors. Even a behavior similar to the use of choices for the purpose of protection will contribute to different choices based on different moral reasons. This indicates in any society, the prevalence of different moral factors is objective, and morality should reflect a growing process. This growth is to help us understand why and how meaningful the behavior conducted by us is. The research in this paper also reminds us that people do not only live or make choices according to scientific standards, but also consider moral factors, cultural traditions, psychological factors, and the factors of the community which they belong. This diversity factor leads to diversity in people's behaviors and choices. What we need to do in real life is to analyze the various factors, explore the problematic situations caused by the various factors, and coordinate the various conflicts. This kind of exploration of moral

significance can be found in our real life rather than in an abstract goal out of reach in the metaphysical sense.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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