

Colloquy

“L'ENFER, C'EST LES AUTRES”: Proximity as an Ethical Problem during COVID-19

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In New York City in May 2020, a journalist photographed a sign announcing that “selfish joggers who jog on this block without masks be warned—we value the lives of our elderly neighbors and will throw stuff on you from our windows!!!” (Schwartzman 2020). An imagined invisible threat of contagion was projected onto interlopers, simultaneously signaling social virtue and its lack (“selfish joggers”), identifying insiders and outsiders (“our neighbors”), and threatening reprisal. All over the world, media coverage of threatened or actual vigilantism, articulated either in tandem with or in opposition to laws policing proximity, has triggered debate. Such cases both reflect a pandemic imaginary of how disease is transmitted and articulate ideas about relations between the state and its citizens, social care, and the ethics of nearness and farness.



Figure 1. Dublin social distancing stencil, 2020. Photo by Thomas Strong.

During the COVID-19 emergency, countries the world over are debating concepts like *social distancing*, *lockdown*, and *sheltering in place*. Some people express outrage at teenagers playing basketball in a public park. Others imagine curtain-twitchers behind every window, anxious to report anyone holding hands across household “bubbles.” In the declaration of emergency, leftists see a frightening expansion of sovereign power. So do right-wing agitators. Communities struggle with historical and novel disciplinary bureaucracies of policing, health-care provision, and state surveillance. These are the anxieties of our time. They cross borders like the virus that provokes them. What are they about?

People everywhere are asking themselves about the moral meanings of physical distance—or are actively avoiding such questions. One might say that the ethical significance of proximity—that is, closeness or farness as ethical qualities of relations (Strathern 2020)—is being newly troubled across a range of habits, practices, and personal relationships: sex, care, kinship, friendship, cohabitation, coworkers, dress, pedestrians, public transport, shopping. But reflexive ethical consideration of the imperatives of, say, social distancing (more correctly, *physical distancing*), often gets framed in terms of the verities of law and science. An image emerges of the public as either complying or not with lockdown regulations, with-

out accounting for the moral decision-making underpinning the variety of ways in which we may engage in forms of responsibility, care, or ethical concern for the other in public and private contexts.

Indeed, forms of social control associated with state epidemic response and the actions they provoke are rarely recognized and expressed as ethical. Rather, questions of an ethical nature—about the harm and happiness our relations with others engender—become masked by discourses of risk and law, science and sampling, conspiracy and global power plays. The essays in this Colloquy reassert the primacy of the ethical. Through case studies from five different countries, contributors shed light on what the hype of the pandemic often conceals: the forms of ethical reflection and conduct that the problems of proximity and contagion can elicit or repress.

Much of public discourse about social distancing is made intelligible through the language of risk, for example, battles over *R*-numbers and mortality rates. This discourse surrounding the pandemic and its associated argot (“flattening the curve”) frequently eclipses other forms of risk, such as the emotional or mental risks of physical distancing. It may trump all other forms of reasoning, as when citizens block roads (as [Susanna Trnka \[2021, this issue\]](#) describes in Aotearoa/New Zealand), refusing to allow “outsiders” entry, when government controls on proximity block people from accessing clinic care (as [Susan Levine and Lenore Manderson \[2021, this issue\]](#) describe for South Africa), or when police quarantine apartment buildings (as [L. L. Wynn \[2021, this issue\]](#) describes in Australia). It may be obviated as when privileged classes demand their rights to go mask-free (as [Carolyn M. Rouse \[2021, this issue\]](#) describes in the United States), or people continue to hook up in public places (as [Thomas Strong \[2021, this issue\]](#) describes in Ireland). It may be a new demand on or by national collectivities, while simultaneously articulating deep-seated axes of violence, disadvantage, and lack of care between states and citizens, as our contributors collectively demonstrate.

This Colloquy analyzes ethical reflection as an alternative to merely assessing compliance with expert dictates. Rather than assuming that subjects are driven by fear, rational cost-benefit analyses, or blind obedience to the ideology of risk, we see people crafting an ethics of connection and avoidance as part of projects of creating ethical selves and communities. The important questions then become: What values, principles, or behaviors shape how people imagine themselves as responsible, caring subjects during COVID-19? How do we grapple with the “competing responsibilities” ([Trnka and Trundle 2017](#)) we now feel toward the law, the state, the community, the lover, the grandparent, the stranger? How does our

awareness of not just being in the world but (seemingly perpetually) being in the midst of others shape our modes of ethical reasoning and the affective states associated with them (cf. [Sartre 1958](#))? How do these articulate with novel forms of disadvantage emerging from the pandemic, as well as with enduring forms of dispossession and structural violence? What does this suggest about new possibilities for collective care?

Our focus on proximity extends current work on how COVID-19's physical distancing and lockdown regulations are reconfiguring intimacies of various kinds ([Dawson and Dennis 2020a, 2020b, 2021](#); [Lopes et al. 2020](#); [Schlosser and Harris 2020](#)). This scholarship has greatly elucidated the affective dimensions of new distancing regimes, but proximity and intimacy are not equivalent. While COVID-19 has certainly reconfigured intimate practices, it has also altered our spatial relations with others with whom we may, or may not, be on intimate terms—the stranger who stands too close in the supermarket; the flatmates or neighbors who share toilet facilities. Responses to the pandemic demonstrate novel ways of reckoning with matters of proximity (e.g., determining how, when, and to what extent to move out of another's way, what level of surveillance and coercion is appropriate, and who should undertake these). Moreover, individual and collective understandings of viral contagion, as well as governmental mandates, class divisions, racial and structural violence, and gender and sexual ideologies ([Team and Manderson 2020](#); [Wynn 2020](#)) construct new axes of privilege ([Long 2020](#); [Napier 2020](#); [Trnka et al. 2021](#)) in terms of who can define, enact, and enforce “appropriate” ethical conduct.

ORDINARY ETHICS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a groundswell of anthropological attention to ethics. Our work is primarily informed by approaches focusing on “ordinary ethics”: the ways that ethical reasoning and comportment take place as part of quotidian experience (for three distinct articulations, see [Das 2006](#); [Lambek 2010](#); [Brodwin 2013](#)). We focus on how communicative acts (including language, gesture, and bodily comportment) are constitutive of ethics, while remaining attentive to how state discourses, political processes, and bureaucratic norms inform and motivate particular forms of ethical engagement ([Calhoun 2010](#); [Fassin 2012](#); [Brodwin 2013](#)). Our prompt to focus on everyday elaborations of individual and collective ethics around proximity comes from both the ethnographic specificities of physical distancing, sheltering in place, staying within one's bubble, and the like that we and others are experiencing and the long lineage of scholarly analyses

of responsibility, care, and violence in relations between self and Other including, among others, the work of [Veena Das \(2006\)](#), [João Biehl \(2013\)](#), [Sarah Pinto \(2014\)](#), and [Emmanuel Levinas \(1969\)](#).

In times of national crisis and during medical emergencies, ethical reasoning may take on heightened meaning yet remains reflective of broader social and political processes ([Scarry 2010](#); [Stevenson 2014](#)). Thus, rather than examining “crisis ethics” as a distinct phenomenon, we trace how long-standing identifications and social cleavages such as class and classism, gender and gender discrimination, ethnic identity and racism, sexuality and sexual phobias *as well as* the language, sensibilities, and new legislation of the COVID-19 crisis come to imbue individual and collective decision-making.

We take a specific interest in ethical self-fashioning ([Foucault 1988](#); [Laidlaw 2002](#); [Mahmood 2005](#); [Zigon 2008](#); [Faubion 2012](#)) in terms of how it informs, and is informed by, (imagined, enacted, legislated) relations with “Others.” We are thus particularly concerned with conceptualizations of personal and collective responsibility, including how reciprocal, interpersonal responsibilities and dependencies are envisioned ([Faubion 2001](#); [Adam 2017](#)), as well as enactments of larger-scale exchanges and flows of obligation and acts of care between citizens, states, and corporations ([Welker 2014](#); [Trnka 2017](#)). As [Susanna Trnka and Catherine Trundle \(2017\)](#) have argued, these three facets of responsibility (personal, interpersonal, citizen-state) may interact to reinforce, bifurcate, disperse, or multiply one’s sense of obligations and abilities to achieve them. For too long, state-of-emergency critiques have tended to portray citizens as ignorant or duped by state power, eliding their roles in envisioning and delineating crises and extending the powers of the state (exceptions include [Honig 2009](#); [Fassin 2012](#); [Trnka 2020a, 2020b](#)). We aim to question this portrayal, not by denying how emergencies are employed (and sometimes manufactured) to extend state power, but by examining citizens’ active engagement with the state through everyday responses to how contagion is imaginatively connected with self and Others, eliciting acts of distancing, care, or protection through the disciplining of proximity.

DISEASE IMAGINARIES

In considering the Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australian, American, Irish, and South African publics’ fears (or lack of fears) of COVID-19, our contributions examine the interpretive work that people undertake to understand how an invisible pathogen moves between people, and how that shapes their formulation of everyday spatial ethics of relatedness and care, responsibility and otherness.

In the wake of persistent uncertainties about how COVID-19 is transmitted, and contestation over the veracities of scientific information (Rouse 2020), we are all compelled to rethink relations in terms of proximity and code distance as ethical. In one sense, we are asked to avoid: “stay home.” On the other, we are asked not to avoid but to maintain precise physical distances from others. In the midst of striving to understand, question, uphold, or subvert regulations, we also make our own assessments of the ethics of nearness and farness.

In focusing on the anthropology of ethics our aim is not to determine whether something is ethical, but rather how the very category of *the ethical* is made present (or absented) in discourses about contagion, its spread, and its containment. Our contributors’ insights into these processes derive from ongoing fieldwork reshaped by lockdown (Levine and Manderson 2021; Rouse 2021; Strong 2021) and de novo projects, born from the pandemic (Trnka 2021; Wynn 2021). In each case, lockdowns and physical-distancing regulations have recast what is ethnographically possible, reconfiguring reliance on digital communications and social media sources, as well as on more traditional, physically distanced modes of participant observation, for example, walking ethnographies (Trnka 2021) and drive-by observation (Levine and Manderson 2021).

In their contribution, Levine and Manderson (2021) underscore the embodied histories of proximity in post-apartheid South Africa, revealing how long-standing class and racial divides preclude disadvantaged segments of society from being able to enact a novel “ethics of care as distance.” Rouse (2021) analyzes a similar axis of disadvantage in the United States to suggest a rethinking of anthropology’s critiques of biopolitics, indicating how those on the losing side of the “veil” between Black and white Americans struggle to assert their humanity, much less receive state care. Wynn (2021) draws our attention to new “imageries” of infection, demonstrating how national narratives grounded in long-standing stereotypes and disadvantage fuel Australia’s COVID-19 response. Focusing on Ireland, Strong (2021) considers how gay men’s continuation of sexual encounters reveals both the limits of state authority and the ethical meaning of sustaining sexuality, despite the pandemic. In considering how the state galvanized collective engagement in COVID-19 restrictions in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Trnka (2021) focuses on the mobilization of different publics in enacting ethical proximities that distance “others” while keeping “us” together in ways that simultaneously support, extend, and contravene physical distancing regulations. Collectively, these pieces underscore how states and citizenries formulate the ethical dimensions of proxim-

ity in a time when maintaining the “right” interpersonal spatial relationalities has become vested with profound moral meaning.

ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 emergency, people around the world are debating concepts like physical distancing, lockdown, and sheltering in place. The ethical significance of proximity—that is, closeness or farness as ethical qualities of relations (Strathern 2020)—is thus being newly troubled across a range of habits, practices, and personal relationships. Through five case studies from Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States, contributors to this Colloquy shed light on what the hype of the pandemic often conceals: the forms of ethical reflection, reasoning, and conduct fashioned during the pandemic. [COVID-19; infectious disease; ethics; pandemic; physical distancing; proximity; state of emergency]

NOTES

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