

[Essay]

Lockdowns and Life-Value Covid Response as an Existential Problem

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Abstract

The essay explores the ambiguities of Albert Camus' maxim that once accept the absurdity of life, then what matters is the most living and not the best. The worldwide lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 crisis form a context which brings to light an ambiguity in the idea of "the most living." If one reads it as meaning the most experiences for each particular individual, then an existentialist-libertarian critique of lockdowns seems to follow. Since there can be no making up for lost experiential time in a finite life-span, any experiences foregone because of lockdowns are opportunities permanently lost. If, on the other hand, one understands human individuals as members of social wholes who owe their existence and capacity for enjoyment to relationships and institutions, then it might be the case that "the most living" is compatible with temporary lockdowns. Individuals are social beings, and for a social being, the most living must be understood as the most living for everyone.

We are entering year two of the Covid-19 pandemic. While nothing about the experience has been good, it has been a poignant reminder of the paradox that bad experiences provide the best context for philosophical reflection about ultimately important matters. The forced suspension and cessation of taken for granted social intercourse, the disruption of travel even within countries and regions, and mass unemployment have unintentionally created a philosophical laboratory in which existential questions about the value of social interaction, friendship, new experiences, the ability to spontaneously move from place to place, and work can be posed with rare clarity. Solitude can be a good, of course, but when it is freely chosen and not imposed by pandemic crisis and enforced by state power. Imposed isolation has focussed attention of the value of mundane experiences that in normal times we do not reflect upon. We are apt to take our friends or a simple walk across town for granted and not regard them as essential aspects of good lives. Typically, we experience work life as alienating and exploitative. The restrictions that Covid-19 mitigation measures have imposed on the most ordinary

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and taken for granted aspects of life have, I believe, helped us see the other side: friends and everyday mobility are simple sensuous pleasures that help reconcile us to the world. Work is a source of meaningful contribution to our societies and not only exploitative and alienating drudgery.

If it is true that the restrictions placed on social interaction are harmful to people because we need to be together in shared social space, then the question arises of the extent to which people committed to the richest possible life ought to accept the ethical legitimacy of lockdowns. I reflect on this problem from the perspective that recognises: a) that life has natural and social conditions and b) that it will end in death, and c) there is no rational reason or evidence to support belief in a redeeming afterlife. From the acceptance of the finitude of embodied life seems to follow an ethic of experience maximization: if life on earth is everything, then the rational goal of every individual would seem to be to try get the most out of life and resist any impediments placed in the way of realizing that goal. Looked at abstractly from the standpoint of a mortal individual, that conclusion seems to follow straightforwardly. However, we are not abstract individuals but share social space with other human beings.

Covid-19 restrictions set an old ethical paradox about social individuality in new and sharp relief. If we stress the social side of individuality, the obligations we each owe to the lives of others come to the fore: if no one contributed anything to the common wealth, none of the goods, resources, and relationships that we need to survive, develop, and flourish would exist. We would all perish if we lived in complete solitude. Nevertheless, if we stress the individual contours of our own experience, we are tempted to treat our life as our own problem and others' lives as their problem. We need not be antagonistic to others, but might reject as illegitimate any restrictions on our own experience justified by reference to others' well-being. If we have but one life to live, then concern with making it good means that we must prioritise the quantity of good experiences that we ourselves, as particular individuals, can accumulate. We can grant that others should do the same, but also regard any claims that they make on our attention and activity as at best necessary sacrifices. I will explore this problem in the shadow of a maxim expressed by Camus: "What counts is not the best living, but the most living."¹

I want to explore this paradox of social individuality by reflecting on the ambiguity hidden within what appears to be Camus's unambiguous claim. If "the

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1955, p. 45.

most living” means the most living for each particular individual, then an existentialist-libertarian critique of lockdowns seems to follow. There can be no doubt that, at least in the short term, those restrictions subtract from the quantity of experiences that it is possible for a person to have.² The existential libertarian could therefore argue that since death is inevitable, the possibility of dying from Covid might appear to be a risk worth taking for anyone in reasonable health. Since there can be no making up for lost experiential time in a finite life-span, any experiences foregone because of lockdowns are opportunities permanently lost. This argument is not irrational, only selfish, but it might also not be the definitive reading of Camus’ aphorism.

If we understand human individuals as members of social wholes who owe their existence and capacity for enjoyment to relationships and institutions, then it might be the case that we need to reinterpret what “the most living” means. Looking at the problem from the social side of individuality, it might follow that the demand for the most living requires respect for lockdowns. From this perspective, the “most living” is a generalizable value that pertains equally to all and not just me. If wanton disregard for protocols increases mortality rates beyond what they would be in cases where they were followed, then although particular individuals might experience a temporary reduction in life-valuable experiences, these reductions are justified by the greater number of lives saved and one’s positive participation is this positive life-action. One’s own contribution to the success of the public health project would count towards “the most living” for each of the individuals involved. The more people that are alive to experience the goods the world has to offer the more living there will be. While it is therefore legitimate to question lockdowns and demand the widest possible latitude for activity and interaction compatible with stopping the spread of Covid, the restrictions are not, from this perspective, illegitimate.

I will defend the latter interpretation through a three-step argument. I will begin by reflecting upon the reasons why deprivation of good life-experiences is

² This argument is not an abstractly philosophical problem for me. I have been torn since the very beginning of the pandemic between the existentialist-libertarian impulse that I *feel* and my responsibilities as a member of society that I *understand*. I have been critical of lockdowns because I think that they stem from a demand for absolute security from death which it is not rational to demand. Nevertheless, I have grudgingly accepted the restrictions, because there can be no denying that they mitigate the spread of Covid-19 (and because those who have organized resistance to the lockdowns tend also towards irrational denial of the reality of Covid. I do not want the arguments that I make against the philosophical foundations of the lockdown strategy to be associated with lunatic claims that the pandemic is a hoax).

harmful. Although I have criticized it in other contexts, I will draw upon the “deprivation” account of the badness of death to help make my case.³ In the second section I will unpack the existentialist-libertarian interpretation of the meaning of the most living in the context of Covid lockdowns. I will conclude that while the libertarian interpretation of the maxim is cogent and defensible, it is not the best interpretation. In the concluding section I will show how a social understanding of individuality leads to a more inclusive interpretation of the most living. Since this inclusive interpretation expands the scope of the most living to society as a whole, *without denying anything essential to the individual*, it is the better interpretation. For Camus the existentialist, both possibilities are legitimate and one must simply choose between them. I will argue that there is a choice to be made, but if we undertake the philosophical work the choice demands, we will see that the ethically best choice is to accept the obligations of social individuality as a necessary condition for the overall growth of life-valuable experiences.

I: Finitude and the Harm of Deprivation of Experience and Activity

Let us begin by fixing some terms necessary to the argument. I start from the position that life is the precondition of all value in the universe. Other things being equal, all living things struggle to live, which is material proof that they value their lives, to the extent that their sentient and cognitive capacity enables. Human beings have the most expansive and deep capacities for understanding and valuing our lives (and other lives). While other life forms connect instinctively to nature, human beings can consciously organize their social lives to connect with and support what McMurtry calls the “life-ground of value.” The “life-ground of value” is the connection between living things and the world that enables their on-going existence “as a felt bond of being.”⁴ Living is not simply respiration and

³ In an earlier paper I argued that the deprivation account of death’s badness is not as obviously true as its proponents think. It is true that being killed before one’s natural life span has been exhausted is bad for the person who dies, but death in general, as a fundamental frame of human finitude, need not be feared as bad. It is also possible to argue that recognition of the inescapability of death helps us better value this one life that we do have to lead. See (reference removed to protect anonymity). I do not think that my argument in this paper contradicts that earlier conclusion, but it does perhaps set its argument in a somewhat different light. In the earlier paper I implied that death could be seen as good if we use it as motivation for living well. I think what I ought to have said is not that death can be interpreted as good (contra the deprivationist argument), but that death after a full and free life does not deprive us of anything that we had reason to expect. Life is not bad, therefore, just because it is finite. See Jeff Noonan, “The Life-Value of Death,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Life*, 3(1), January 2013, pp. 1-23.

⁴ John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System*, (Toronto:

metabolic activity, but an active valuation of existence made real in the effort that living things exert in order to survive, develop, and live the best lives of which they are capable.

Life-value thus has two senses. On the one hand, the resources and relationships that satisfy the needs of living things lives are instrumentally life-valuable because they sustain life and enable the realization of its organic capacities for sentient experience, movement, thought, creative activity, and mutually affirmative relationships.⁵ Needs can be distinguished from mere demands or desires according to the criterion that “is a need if and only if, and the extent that, deprivation of N always results in the reduction of organic capability.”⁶ Human needs are both material-natural and socio-cultural, but their underlying connection to good lives is the same.⁷ If we are deprived of that which we need, we suffer definite forms of harm, up to and including death. If, on the other hand, we are furnished with everything we require, we can develop our organic capacities and live active, full, and free lives. The enjoyed expression of our sentient, cognitive, creative, and relational capacities is intrinsically life-valuable.

Life-value philosophy thus seems to concur with the “deprivation account” of death’s badness. As Frederick Kaufman notes, “it is bad to be deprived. It presupposes some good that I don’t get, but otherwise would have gotten were it not for an intervention that deflected it.”⁸ It is easy to see why death appears to be the worst possible event that can befall a human being. It is the permanent cessation of the possibility of any experience whatsoever. If deprivation in general is bad, and death deprives us of all possible future goods, then death is absolute deprivation, and therefore absolutely bad.

Nagel was the first to systematically explicate the deprivation account of death’s badness.⁹ Contrary to Epicurean bravado and its claim that “death is

Garamond), 1998, p. 23.

⁵ See John McMurry, *Philosophy and World Problems Volume 2: What is Good? What is Bad? The Value of all Values Across Times, Places, and Theories*, (Oxford: EOLSS Publishers), 2011, p. 213.

⁶ McMurry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 164.

⁷ I cannot enter into the detailed arguments required to fully justify this criterion of need here or unpack what I regard to be the fundamental classes of needs for human beings. See Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012, for the required arguments.

⁸ Frederick Kaufmann, “Lucretius and the Fear of Death” *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*, Michael Chlobi, ed., (Rowman Littlefield International: London), p. 54.

⁹ Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Nous*, Vol. 4, No. 1, February, 1970, pp. 73-80. (reprinted in *Mortal Questions*, 1979).

nothing to us,” death is, in a sense, *everything* for a mortal creature, precisely because of the *nothingness* it portends.¹⁰ Death is therefore bad, according to Nagel, because it is the loss of our capacity to do, or be, or feel anything at all. Philip Larkin captures the dread the thought of our inevitable disappearance inspires in his austere terrifying “Aubade.” That which we fear, Larkin sees with the clarity of a poet, “is the total emptiness forever, the sure extinction that we travel to.”¹¹ If we take our earthly existence as sole and ultimate, then to *live* with this projective thought of our own absolute negation could ruin the enjoyment of any moment of existence. Whatever satisfaction one might feel in a moment of sensuous enjoyment could be extinguished by the thought that the next moment could be one’s last.

Human experience, Nagel notes, “does not embody the idea of a natural limit.” We can *imagine* ourselves doing interesting things forever, but our knowledge interjects by reminding us of the terrifying reality that our life has an expiry date. On the one hand, we are conscious of ourselves as the “subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future.” On the other, we know that while this future is not essentially limited in imagination (I can project myself into an indefinite future), we are also bodies that will die. Death is bad because it is “the abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods.”¹² I have argued in the paper noted above that the success of the deprivation account of death’s badness depends upon fixing our consciousness upon an illusion: the possibility of endless life. If we think of ourselves as we are, finite mortal subjects, it is possible to cure ourselves of the desire for immortality, and instead devote ourselves to intense, engaged, and committed forms of life. We can devote ourselves, in other words, to some version of Camus’s “the most living.”

While there are thus problems with the deprivation account of death’s badness, it is correct to view deprivation as harmful to human beings, provided that we make the important qualification that harmful forms of deprivation involve lack of access to resources and relationships that we need. To be deprived of nutritious food when such is available is a genuine harm; to be deprived of endless life is not, because endless lives are impossible. Since we are integral bio-social beings, our needs extend beyond organic requirements of life to include social

¹⁰ Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, eds., (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1988, p. 23.

¹¹ Philip Larkin, “Aubade” *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07> (accessed, Nov 18th, 2020).

¹² Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Mortal Questions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1979, p. 10.

requirements of living well. Amongst the most important of those needs are the need to be able to move freely in space and to connect in friendship, love, and sexual relationships with those who want to connect with us in friendship, love, and sexual relationships. The valorization of these relationships does not exclude the value of chosen withdrawal and solitude, but when it is imposed by coercive authority, as in a prison sentence, it becomes one of the worst punishments imaginable.

In principle (abstracting for the moment from structural impediments like poverty or racism) the social and natural worlds offer an endless variety of things to see and do and feel. In order to see and do and feel them, we must be able to move freely in space according to choice and the limits imposed by the existence and interests of others. Our personalities cannot develop in isolation from other people, and there is intrinsic value in the joy we feel in the presence of those whom we love and desire and who love and desire us in turn. To be deprived of these experiences and relationships is thus harmful. Even if the deprivation is temporary, as Covid-related lockdowns are supposed to be, the harm is real and permanent. The harm, of course, is not on the same scale as permanent physical harms, but if it is true that to be deprived of an experience that would have been good to enjoy detracts from the overall enjoyment and goodness of life, one has been harmed to the extent that one's finite life was deprived of a good. The question then becomes: if the harm is real and permanent, are people who value free activity and relationship justified in rejecting the legitimacy of lockdowns.

To understand why those harms are real and permanent, we have to reflect a moment upon the implications of our mortality for the goodness of our lives. Mortal beings have an indefinite but finite lifespan. The goodness of our lives depends upon the goodness of the experiences we have, the activities we do, and the relationships we forge. Since death is the permanent cessation of the possibility of this body having more experiences, doing more activities, and forging new relationships, it is a fixed frame on the goodness of life for each individual. Judging the matter from within the frame of finite individual experience, the range of experiences and activities that life makes available to us becomes the fundamental existential-ethical problem.

Since death is a fixed and final frame on life, deprivation of goods in life seems to be a zero sum game. We cannot make up for the deprivation of one potentially good experience by reference to a future good experience. If we miss out on something good, for whatever reason, then we have permanently missed

out on it. The individual can feel deprived of something good even if they get two of the same at some point in the future. Now, since we can be certain that we will die but usually not certain about when, an essential existential-ethical question is: is it ever rational to deprive ourselves (or to acquiesce in an external power's depriving us) of something it would otherwise be good to do or experience?

On the one hand it seems obvious that the deprivation of our social needs during Covid lockdowns is justifiable because these restrictions save lives, leaving more subjects of experience alive and active than would have been the case had the virus been allowed to burn through the population unchecked (as indeed it was in Brazil and parts of the United States). But is that conclusion as obvious as it seems? If one focuses only on their own experience, and accepts that they are going to die, if not of Covid then of something else, and if not something else, then Covid, then it is not obviously irrational to conclude that the deprivations imposed by lockdowns are unjustifiable harms. Covid or no, the future is uncertain save for our eventual death. If I forego a good today, there is no guarantee that I will be around tomorrow to experience something else that is good tomorrow. What is certain is only the deprivation of today's good. Hence one could argue that for a finite mortal being 'seize the day' is always the best principle to follow. Risk is inherent in life and it is up to each person to calculate the degree of risk that they are willing to accept. I will now further explore this generically libertarian response to deprivation of social needs under lockdown conditions by turning to Camus' aphorism.

II: The Primacy of Today

French existentialism was historically associated with the left, but it begins from an assumption of individual aloneness in the universe that could also make it amenable to libertarian interpretations.¹³ I am using 'libertarian' in a generically ethical and not political sense. A libertarian in this sense is one who prioritises the maximisation of their own experiences and activities because they only have one life to live and regard it as unjustifiable self-sacrifice to abide by externally imposed restrictions. They need not for this reason be antagonistic to

¹³ The figure of Sartre is of course central to this connection between Marxism and existentialism. See Jean Paul Sartre, "Marxism and Existentialism," *Existentialism vs. Marxism: Conflicting Views on Humanism*, George Novack, ed., (New York: Dell Publishing), 1966, pp. 175-206.

other people, or committed to the privatisation of public institutions and the rule of free market principles, even though, in practice, they tend to favour such arrangements. Their primary goal in life is simply to see and feel and hear and taste and smell as much as they possibly can, because death is the permanent cessation of the possibility of further experience. They therefore regard as an unjustifiable sacrifice of sensuous and intellectual enjoyment any demand to curtail their own range of experiences. Camus certainly seems to defend such a position in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Let us look more closely at his argument.

The maxim that what counts is the most living and not the best occurs in the context of a discussion about the relationship between death and freedom. According to Camus, once one accepts that death is their absolute extinction, the conclusion that life is absurd follows. Once one accepts that conclusion, the principle that the most living and not the best is what matters follows. He argues that “belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality. If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most.”¹⁴ Once we have accepted the finality of death but chosen “to live without appeal” rather than commit suicide, we have committed ourselves, so Camus concludes, to an ethic of experience maximization.

This interpretation of his maxim presupposes a certain understanding of individuality and experience. It treats the individual as a sentient and thinking ego that sees the world through its own eyes, evaluates the world with its own brain, and chooses which way to turn when a crossroads presents itself. This ego can choose deep attachments to others or it can choose solitude, but whichever choice it makes it does so as an individual bent on getting the most out of life. People who reject Covid lockdowns do not necessarily do so because they do not care about others, but they do argue (or the argument is implicit in their behaviour) that every individual is entitled to decide to what extent their life-activity should be restrained by the dangers of Covid. From this perspective, if life is the maximization of experience and activity and death is inevitable in any case, restrictions on life-activity appear to contradict the maxim. Death is the one thing

¹⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 45.

we cannot prevent, so we need to live as fully, freely, and joyously as we can.

If what matters is the maximization of my experiences as an existentially isolated ego, then there are no obviously good reasons to limit what I do in life for the sake of some abstract public utility. There is no time consciousness after death. It is therefore not possible for a dead person to regret not living longer than they in fact lived. However, it *is* possible to regret not doing today what you will not have a chance to do tomorrow. If the sole goal in life is to maximise one's own experiences, then it is irrational to accept restrictions on one's own experiences where ignoring them only slightly increases the risk of death. If what matters is the most living and not the best, then it is up to each person to decide what sort of commitments they want to forge, but in no case do the circumstances of mortal life impose a duty on anyone to constrain themselves for the sake of other individuals or an overarching social interest. Recognition of our finitude leads to a deeper engagement with life's possibilities, but from an ego-centric and hedonistic perspective, other people might have equal interests, but they do not outweigh one's own interest in maximizing experience. Worse than actual death would be a "living death" in which I constantly rob myself of experiences for fear that one will be my last. One day *will be* my last, so the rational conclusion (once we have accepted life's absurdity) is to resist whatever impedes your action *now*, because the future for all—death—is guaranteed in any case.

To bring it back to the case at hand: The overwhelming majority of fatalities from Covid-19 have been elderly victims or people with serious pre-existing medical conditions.¹⁵ The existential libertarian might argue that the elderly are nearer death anyway, so they should choose against lockdown restrictions that might prolong their respiratory functions but rob them of meaningful experiences. The young and healthy are not at appreciable risk of dying, so they should choose a life of active engagement as well. Only those with pre-existing medical conditions seem to have good reason, on Camus' grounds, to choose to restrict their activity. Therefore, they should restrict their activity. They should not expect that public policies be enacted that coercively restrict the activities of people who are already close enough to death to make any risk to live intensely one more day

¹⁵ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, "Weekly Updates by Select Demographic and Geographic Characteristics," https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/index.htm#SexAndAge (accessed, February 9th, 2021). While young people were more affected in later waves of the pandemic, that fact does not change anything essential to the libertarian argument, which focuses on the individual's right to decide how much risk to accept for themselves, and not with the degree of risk as such.

worth it, or those in the prime of life but who one day will not be to curtail their activities and relationships. In both cases, Camus' maxim seems to imply that such restrictions would be illegitimate deprivations and therefore harmful.

The almost instinctive counter-argument to this position would be to claim that the rejection of Covid lockdown measures on the basis that they are illegitimate restrictions of one's own experience stem from callous indifference to human life. The protagonist from *The Outsider*, Merseault, might be invoked as an example in support of this counter-argument. Merseault is perpetually and permanently alienated from other people. He shows no capacity to recognise their interests as making any binding claim on his feelings towards them. He is abusive to his girlfriend and he murders the Arab boy on beach for no reason at all. His interrogators marvel not only at his lack of remorse, but at his complete indifference to the proceedings against him. His police questioner becomes enraged when Merseault cannot answer his question about why he shot the Arab boy. In order to elicit an answer, he asks if Merseault believes in God. "When I answered "No" he plumped down in his chair indignantly. That was unthinkable, he said, all men believe in God ... Do you wish, he asked indignantly, my life to have no meaning?" Really, I couldn't see how my wishes came into it, and I told him as much."¹⁶ What rankles the prosecutor as much as Merseault's lack of remorse is his honesty. No one wants to hear it, but at the end of the day, whether we have followed the rules or not, we all die, and what matters after that inevitability has come to pass? But that seems to be indifference towards life, not its embrace. Do not lockdown critics display the same indifference to the value of life?

It is true some may, but I am not focussing on every possible rejection of the logic of lockdowns but only those that justify their criticism in the name of the good of maximising life-experience. I do not read Merseault as an absurd hero but as a victim of absurdity. Merseault recognizes the ultimate meaninglessness of life, but it does not cause him to embrace a life of maximal experience and intensity. Absurdity alienates him from every possible good and renders him indifferent, almost insensate, to life. For Merseault, what matters is neither the most living nor the best: nothing matters to him. The existential libertarian of my example does care about life. The basis of their argument is that meaningful and valuable *living* is being sacrificed to the preservation of mere biological functioning.

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*; (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 1974, pp. 72-3.

Biological functioning is not intrinsically valuable but only a material condition for that which is of value: active, engaged, experience and activity.

The existential libertarian is therefore not necessarily callously indifferent towards life, but honest about its finitude. They do not wish anyone an early death but rather want to serve as an example of how to live: since life will end regardless of what we do, we should choose to act and experience as much as we can. It is not that Camus' absurd hero rejects responsibility for their actions, but only the conviction that the profession of an ethical code necessarily makes a difference to the value of life. "There can be no question of holding forth on ethics. I have seen people behave very badly with great morality and I note everyday that integrity has no need of rules."¹⁷ Whereas Ivan Karamzov worried that without God everything would be permitted, Camus rejoins that everything is permitted as a matter of historical fact whether God exists or not and adds that "everything is permitted" does not mean that nothing is forbidden."¹⁸ Even those committed to maximizing their own experience and serving as an example for others to live the same way can forbid themselves certain possibilities if they decide that their own integrity as human beings would be compromised. Thus, anything is forbidden which the responsible agent forbids themselves from doing.

In the next section I want to ask whether the choice of self-limitation is consistent with the maxim that what counts is the most living and not the best. I will argue that if we work towards a conception of the individual as a social being, then not only is self-limitation compatible with the maximization of valuable experience, it is required. If that conclusion holds, then lockdown restrictions could be justified on the basis of the argument that they are a temporary demand required by a unique crisis. They do deprive those living under them of valuable experiences but are nevertheless legitimate because they will ultimately enable more valuable individual experiences than if they were ignored.

III: Social Individuality and the Maximization of Life-Experience

Camus himself is alive to the ambiguity that attaches to the meaning of "most." In a footnote he admits—but without elaborating—that quantity cannot be separated in every instance from quality. Thus, while his aphorism seems an unambiguous spur to simply do as much and feel as much as possible in life, it,

¹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.50.

combined with his reflections on self-restraint and integrity, opens the door to a more complex understanding of “the most living.” Here “the most living” means the accumulation of the most life-valuable experiences. We can define “life-valuable experience” in terms of the organic capacities of human beings to sense and experience, move and interact, and relate and create. McMurtry’s “primary axiom of value” adds what is missing from Camus’ maxim: the general *content* of experiences worth having. It reads: “x is of value if, and only if, and to the extent that, x consists in a more coherently inclusive range of thought/feeling/action.”¹⁹ The crucial qualifier here is “more coherently inclusive.” That qualifier pertains not only to the coherence of experiences within an individual life, but also to the coherence of the experiences of separate individuals within a social whole.

Hedonistic theories going back to Epicurus have understood the need for individuals to discipline and distribute their pleasures over time. That is, if one seeks to maximise the sensuous pleasures they enjoy over a lifetime, they must accept that some immediate pleasures should be avoided because they will shorten life and lead to a reduction of overall life-enjoyment. However, most hedonist theories, fail to examine the relationship between individual and social whole or, if they do, tend to see the individual’s pleasure and society’s operation as in tension. The existential libertarian interpretation of Camus’ maxim assumes this tension between individual and society. McMurtry’s primary axiom provides a principled way of resolving the problem without sacrificing the interests of individuals. If it is true that life-value consists in the expression of our organic capacities and that which enables that expression, and collective labour and institutional organization are fundamental conditions of both, then more life-value is produced the more *we work together* to ensure the satisfaction of our needs and the more we desire to realise our capacities in ways which do not exploit or harm others but instead contribute to others’ well-being.

In order to understand this conception of the growth of individual life-value through conscious social organization and coordination, we must shift the experiential ground from the isolated ego accumulating any experiences whatsoever to social individuals who understand that the richness of their lives depends upon their relationships with everyone else. Social individuality is not the product of arbitrary individual dispositions to ‘love one’s neighbour as one’s self’ “but rather recognition of the real natural and social conditions of human life

¹⁹ McMurtry, *Philosophy and World Problems Volume 2: What is Good? What is Bad? The Value of all Values Across Times, Places, and Theories*, p. 213.

that make individual life and choice possible. When Marx says that “the individual is the social being,” he means that the existence and value of any human life has social conditions.²⁰ The food we eat, the clothes that protect us from the elements and signify our identity, the words we use, even the senses through which we become aware of the world are the products of social as well as natural history.²¹ Once we work down to an understanding of the social conditions of individuality, then Merseaultian indifference to the quality of others lives is ruled out, because we understand that the quality of our life is bound up with social institutions and the others whose work contributes to the common funds from which individuals appropriate what they need.

But what about the more positive existential libertarianism of the person who laughs at the possibility of death and invites everyone else to do the same in the name of the most living? To begin an answer to that question let us examine another famous protagonist from Camus’ novels, Dr. Rieux, from *The Plague*. His commitment to the eradication of the disease that invades his town exemplifies the practical significance a social understanding of individuality has for the interpretation of the meaning of “the most living.”

The Plague is chillingly appropriate right now. The novel offers us an example of a character who feels compelled to risk his own life to serve the collective health of his threatened community because he cannot separate own sense of self from the lives of the others with whom he lives. His focus on these connections generates a sense of responsibility which leads him to choose to stay and fight, even though others flee and no one would have judged him harshly had he made the same decision. His choice requires philosophical work: he weighs the balance of his responsibilities and chooses to stay to lead a determined band of fellow citizens against the pestilence threatening their city.

Rieux gives us an example of how philosophical work can help us overcome the temptations of existential libertarianism, accept our responsibilities, but also understand that responsible living is not a sacrifice of potentially valuable experience, but an integral element of “the most living.” He does not regard his choice as saintly self-sacrifice, but human commitment to a good that is more than private but still felt by him as an individual. He feels the pull of other people and discovers an ultimate link between the social good and his own. He understands

²⁰ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3*, (New York: International Publishers), 1975, p. 299.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

that the value of life is never felt as intensely as when it is threatened. He might deprive himself of café life for a time, but he becomes more intensely aware of the preciousness of each moment of life. When the priest tells him that his work affirms the transcendent value of life, Rieux responds that he is not concerned with saving his soul but only fulfilling his social responsibilities.²² These responsibilities are not imposed from on high; they emerge from his feelings of connection with others. His commitment arises from the “felt bond of being” which, as I noted above, is the life-ground of value.²³ Because he chose to struggle, he risked dying sooner than he otherwise would have. If he had fled, he would have had to live with the knowledge that he could have done something to improve the objective conditions of life for himself and others and did not. It seems obvious that Camus is saying that Rieux’s choice shows us that “more life” does not necessarily mean “more intense experiences for me come what may for others,” but “more enjoyment of life for me because I help make life more enjoyable for everyone.” Any worthwhile experience for a mortal being must be subjectively life-valuable, but subjective life-value is bound up with the objective life-value of the world in which we live.

In the history of French existential literature, the implications of social individuality for the value of a full and free life are explored most fully by De Beauvoir. De Beauvoir begins, like Camus and Sartre, from the solitary individual gazing onto an initially indifferent world and asking themselves how they ought to negotiate its possibilities. She agrees in principle with Camus: if there is only this life to live, the only coherent goal is to live as fully as possible. But: there are other people on the planet, some of whom live in terrible conditions. If one judges that the goal of one’s life is to live fully and freely because one’s humanity demands development, then it follows that what one wills for one’s self others, equally human, will for themselves as well. Can my freedom be lived in indifference to those others living in oppressed or dominated circumstances (or in the present case, at higher risk of dying from Covid)? De Beauvoir’s answer is “no.” Any individual who properly understands the real conditions of their lives understands that they are social beings. “My freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, in setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future.”²⁴ The

²² Albert Camus, *The Plague*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1965, p. 178.

²³ McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 23. McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 23.

²⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, (Citadel Press: New York), 1976, p. 82.

more open the future is, the more potential for life-valuable experience and activity there will be. I would add that no one can open their future on their own but must work with others to do so. Hence, the maximization of individual experience is always a social problem.

Anyone who understands that they are social beings understands that the degree of their real, practical freedom (the scope of life-valuable actions and experiences they can do and have) depends upon the society in which they live. The form of society is, from a practical standpoint, the structuring forces that institutions exert on people's lives. The more that institutions enable life-valuable experiences, the more living that everyone is able to enjoy. Hence, where institutions dominate and oppress or fail to protect life, there is less life-value. Where there is less life-value, everyone's experience is relatively impoverished in comparison with a state in which there is more life-value.

De Beauvoir does not have access to the term "life-value" but she does note the distinction, central to my use of the term here, between experiences that are genuinely worth having and madly rushing off in all directions without care, concern, or deliberative direction. "It is not true that recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to do anything you like, it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future."²⁵ If certain forms of collective endeavour are necessary to open the future, then not only is it not the case that free recognition of the freedom of others does not limit one's own freedom, it is a positive condition of it. It is only from the perspective of abstract individuality that other people limit my own freedom. But disconnected conceptions of individuality presuppose what must be explained: the existence of living, valuing, acting, choosing human beings. No *one* would exist without nature and the institutionally mediated work of others.

But if recognition of others' freedom is both follows from a true understanding of our real conditions of life and makes a positive contribution to my own freedom, it also means that the antithesis between freedom and responsibility is overcome. To acknowledge that others' freedom is as good for them as my freedom is good for me, and that the freedom of each and all is advanced the more we consciously and cooperatively work together to overcome social blockages and closures, means that we acknowledge mutual responsibilities. Where there are known harms that would shorten lives (the absolute closure of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

the future to the person who dies) we have a mutual obligation to overcome the threats so far as we are capable. But to accept this obligation is, in periods of danger, to live more intensely. We are not all on the front lines like Rieux, but we are all in the battle, since if even a few ignore lockdown protocols the disease can spread very rapidly.

On the libertarian reading, the maximization of life-value means the maximization of the value of each individual life counted as a discrete unit bounded by the limits of its own experience. However, if we change our understanding of individuals and focus on the relationships upon which their lives depend, then the life-value alternative recommends itself as more coherent. If individuals pay attention to the connections to nature and social institutions and other people that sustain them as centres of subjective experience, then it follows that they can recognise the life-value of those connections and relationships. One still feels the world as a single person, but they also recognise that being alive to feel anything presupposes our membership in webs of life-support and social interaction. Indeed, the demand to be able to see people and interact with them during Covid proves the value of social relationship. However, recognition of the value of those social relationships also argues in favour of the (temporary) legitimacy of the lockdown. It can still be true that what matters is the most living, but since anyone's life depends upon the social institutions and natural environments within which we live, to maximise our own life requires that we pay attention to the impact that our decisions have on others. The "most living" here means the most living overall, for oneself and everyone else.

Few people seem as alienated from other human beings as Merseault. For anyone who feels any sort of affective connection to others, avoiding the experience of the violent or avoidable death of others is not going to be counted as a deprivation, but rather as a positive good. This affective connection motivates them to not directly cause, and perhaps to make positive contributions to, removing the social causes of avoidable death and harm. Hence, anyone who starts from the social nature of individuality will conclude that what matters is the most living, *for everyone*. The choice to maximise one's own life experiences means re-valuing the effort one makes to solve the social causes of avoidable harm: time spent contributing to the solution of those problems is not a subtraction from the quantity of subjective life-value but an addition to it.

Thus, if we accept that our own life is interlinked through social institutions and natural environments to the lives of others, and that collectively we can face

down threats like the plague that would shorten our lifetimes if allowed to run free, an alternative to the libertarian version of “most living” recommends itself as superior. Life is subjectively life-valuable when we are able to sensuously enjoy the realization of our capacities for creation, mutual relationships, and experience of the world of things and human artefacts. Subjective life-value is thus bound up with objective life-value, not only in our heads, but in the world. The less objective life-value there is, the less subjective life value there is, because the systematically need-deprived are not able to subjectively value their lives as fully as they could if they were able to access all of what they need to unfold their capabilities. Human self-consciousness is not self-enclosed consciousness of inner states, but sentient, felt connection to the world. Just as it requires work to focus on the finitude of life as an alternative to brooding over our eventual death, so too it requires work to *feel* our own subjective life-value diminished when we live in circumstances in which others are objectively deprived of what they need. But when we do extend our consciousness in this way, we become aware that when others are harmed there is less objective life-value in the world. Our subjective life-value increases when we are conscious of ourselves as valued and valuable contributors to the production of objective life-value.

A defender of the libertarian version might object that subjective life-value has natural and social conditions, but the existence of these conditions does not entail a beneficent attitude towards others or demand that any individual curtail their chosen course of action for the sake of others. Merseault’s indifference is a perfectly legitimate attitude for a finite mortal subject to adopt. I agree that such attitudes are both possible and actual, but my contention is not that there is an automatic move from the thought of ourselves as mortal social individuals to deep care and concern for others. Rather, my argument is that understanding ourselves as dependent and interdependent social self-conscious, mortal beings is the first step of a longer chain of philosophical reasoning which leads to the conclusion that concern with maximising the value of our lives must involve care and concern for maximizing the value of other lives. But the move from the libertarian to the social individual interpretation of Camus’ maxim remains a choice.