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The Epistemic Duties of Philosophers: An Addendum

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ABSTRACT. In “Were Lockdowns Justified? A Return to the Facts and Evidence”, we argue that Eric Winsberg, Jason Brennan and Chris Surprenant fail to make their case that initial COVID-19 lockdowns were unjustified, due to the fact their argument rests on erroneous factual claims. As is made clear by a response in this volume, the authors mistakenly take us to have been defending the imposition of lockdowns. Here, we clarify the aims of our original paper, and emphasise the importance of getting the facts right when making philosophical arguments in such a contentious domain.

We were slightly concerned, upon having read Eric Winsberg, Jason Brennan and Chris Surprenant’s reply to our paper “Were Lockdowns Justified? A Return to the Facts and Evidence”, that they may have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of our argument, so we issue the following clarification, along with a comment on our motivations for writing such a piece, for the interested reader.

Winsberg et al. claim both that we have misconstrued the aim of their paper, and have failed to make a case for our positive claims. Concerning the aim of their paper, they take pains to point out a distinction between the claim that government leaders did not meet their epistemic burdens in imposing lockdowns, and the claim that “*governments were justified in imposing*” lockdowns (2021, P. 429, their emphasis). The authors, as they clarify at length, wished to make the former claim, while leaving open the option that governments were justified in imposing lockdowns anyway, despite not having met the “needed...epistemic burdens” (2021, P. 431) for doing so. But we need not ruminate on this distinction. The upshot of this, for our purposes, is that they take us to have been making a positive argument for the claim that the imposition of lockdowns was in fact justified. But, we were not attempting to make this argument. Rather,

we were attempting to show that Winsberg et al.'s argument does not go through, because they made false factual claims about the available evidence in spring 2020. Because their conclusion is based on false premises, we contend, their conclusion is not established. Our paper consists entirely of showing why several of the key claims Winsberg et al. make are erroneous, and why, therefore, we should not accept their conclusion.

Although Winsberg et al. take us to be “defending lockdowns” (2021, P. 439), we make explicit, as they themselves cite in their response, that “[w]e aim to show that a convincing answer to this question [of whether governments were justified in imposing lockdowns] *is to date owing*, by arguing that a recent paper by Eric Winsberg, Jason Brennan and Chris W. Surprenant (2020)...is based on false factual claims and does therefore not succeed in motivating their conclusion” (2020, 1, van Basshuysen and White 2021, 406 emphasis added). It should be clear that showing that a conclusion is insufficiently supported by evidence does not imply that the negation is true. Winsberg et al. have, we contend, failed to make the case that governments did not meet their epistemic burdens when imposing lockdowns – this says nothing about whether this conclusion is indeed true, or whether a successful argument could be provided in support of this claim.

Once this is understood, much that Winsberg et al. purport to be perplexed about might make more sense. For instance, they question, at length, why we restricted our focus to studies prior to May 2020 (see e.g. 2021, 440–41). Clearly, if one wishes to defend lockdowns, one should draw from more recent evidence. But if the aim is to assess the claim, made in May 2020,¹ that there was no available evidence in favor of the effectiveness of lockdowns, it is only fair to draw only from evidence available at that time. They question, “with 20/20 hindsight” (2021, 439), our purported use of an April 2020 working paper by Friedson et al. “[i]n defense of the claim that lockdowns are effective”. This indeed might not be the optimal strategy for defending lockdowns. But pointing out that their criticism of Friedson et al. was flawed (see van Basshuysen and White 2021, P. 415–17) does not, again, imply an endorsement of this study, or a defense of lockdowns.

Winsberg et al. are absolutely right to point out the devastating costs of lockdowns. We have written several pieces premised on exactly the same point (see e.g. White and van Basshuysen 2021; White and van Basshuysen forthcoming). The many negative consequences of lockdown are apparent, particularly their disparate impacts on the socioeconomically disadvantaged, and they have been thoughtfully and carefully documented

in philosophical work, for example, in Peter Godfrey-Smith's compelling piece on the costs of extended lockdowns (2021). It is not necessary to make this claim by suggesting that deaths connected to layoffs, as of May 2020, might already be in the same ballpark as deaths from the virus itself, based on a study which does not profess to show this, and demonstrably overestimates unemployment rates (see van Basshuysen and White 2021, 417–18). It does not serve the obviously true statement that the imposition of lockdowns is a high-stakes decision with significant costs to support it with false claims. We believe that it is vital, particularly when writing on a matter of such importance, to get the facts right.

To conduct such a fact check with so little philosophical content is rather thankless work, and rarely undertaken in philosophy—it is perhaps for this reason that Winsberg et al. attribute more ambitious philosophical aims to our piece. But we believe that such work, particularly in this case, makes a necessary contribution to the debate. Questions concerning the justification of lockdowns, including what kind of evidence was available, and what kind of evidence is needed to meet one's epistemic duties when making such a high-stakes decision, are crucial and difficult topics. This important and contentious debate is impeded (regardless of what one's stance on these questions is) by the failure to adequately attend to the veracity of the claims made in support of one's argument.² We believe, in addition, that a more general lesson can be drawn from this debate. All applied philosophy rests inexorably on factual claims. If philosophical work is to be of any use in making progress on real world issues, then philosophers must take seriously their (dare we say it) epistemic duties to attend carefully to the factual accuracy of the claims they marshal in support of their conclusions. This is perhaps something that could receive more attention at the review stage as well, where, one could imagine, reviewers and editors might assume that authors have done their due diligence on this score.

We conclude by offering one further example from Winsberg et al.'s reply that might serve to underscore our points here. In order to demonstrate that the model used in Report 9 (upon which both of our original papers focus) produced overly pessimistic results, Winsberg et al. consider what it would have said about Florida and Sweden—two places that have received attention for their lenient pandemic measures. To determine what this model might have said about Florida, they take 6.7% of the baseline scenario provided by Report 9 concerning U.S. deaths (2.2 million in total). But this baseline scenario is premised on “the (unlikely)

absence of any control measures or spontaneous changes in individual behaviour” (Ferguson et al. 2020, 6). Ferguson himself says that this “was never really going to happen” (Cowley 2020). Why? Because even in the absence of government measures, individuals significantly change their behavior during a pandemic (Gupta, Simon, and Wing 2020, see also van Basshuysen et al. 2021 for discussion). It’s not possible to draw anything from comparing a projection of what would happen if no-one altered their behavior in any way to the actual situation in Florida.

Winsberg et al. come up with the number of deaths for Sweden (which was not a subject of Report 9) by citing the figures in Report 12, also produced by researchers from the Imperial College London. This report makes projections for over 200 countries, including Sweden (Walker et al. 2020). But it is also based on a different model. The findings of Report 9 are based on “CovidSim”; an individual-based model which simulates individuals’ interactions in different types of locations (like workplaces, schools, at home, etc.) and their movements between locations to produce epidemic trajectories. The model used in Report 12, “SQUIRE”, is a compartment model. Rather than modelling individual interactions, this model takes a macroscopic approach, dividing a population into different groups (the susceptible, exposed, infected and recovered) and simulating how the relative sizes of the groups evolve over time (see van Basshuysen et al. 2021).³ Clearly, we can’t use the numbers produced by Report 12 to say anything about Report 9.

It could well be that there’s an important point to be made about the pessimism of projections in Report 9, or Report 12. However, it is difficult to see just what that point is when it is made through incautious comparisons, from which we can draw nothing.⁴

NOTES

1. See Winsberg et al. 2020, 226.
2. See our original paper for a catalogue of these inaccurate claims.
3. The code for each model can be found here (CovidSim: <https://github.com/mrc-ide/covid-sim>) and here (SQUIRE: (<https://github.com/mrc-ide/squire>)).
4. Many thanks to Quill Kukla, Celso Neto and Jan-Felix Müller for their careful and thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

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