

17. Harnessing the epistemic value of crises for just ends

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Introduction

The negative effects of the pandemic upon individuals and societies across the world have been vast and wide-ranging. Most obviously, at the time of writing, over a million people have lost their lives due to the virus and millions of others have lost their jobs.¹ Tragically, these figures are set to continue rising. At the same time, one interesting aspect of the public debate over the COVID-19 crisis is the extent to which it has been infused with a sense of hope and renewal, in spite of these terrible events. There is a tangible sense that this deep rupture to “business as usual” brings with it opportunities to forge a new and better social world.

Looking back over history, the author and political activist Arundhati Roy notes that pandemics tend to force humans “to break with the past and imagine their world anew” (Roy 2020: 214). The COVID-19 pandemic, she claims, is no different: “It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (ibid). Roy’s metaphor of a portal is evocative. But it raises a number of questions. How exactly do crises provide an opportunity for such change? And how should we take advantage of such opportunities? In this chapter we try to sketch some answers to these important questions. In particular, our aim is twofold: first, to give a partial philosophical explanation of why crises can induce rational optimism; and second, on the basis of this, to examine how individuals might permissibly act to persuade others of the merits of understanding the lessons of and necessary policy responses to the crisis in a particular way. We begin by locating more precisely the grounds for this hope in renewal, arguing that it rests primarily in the fact that crises perform the epistemic function of transforming at least some people’s social and political worldview. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature on salience and nudging, we go on to explore

how this epistemic function might be enhanced using direct and indirect means, and discuss some psychological and ethical concerns, respectively, that may lie therein.

A couple of clarifications are in order before we get started. First, we do not presuppose that crises only provide opportunities for social progress; social and democratic backsliding are also, lamentably, a possible and actual historical outcome. This fact partly motivates our discussion about harnessing the epistemic value of crises. Second, although we focus on the epistemic function that crises perform, we do not think this is the only means of political change that they make available. Indeed, we remain neutral about whether crises facilitate far more radical opportunities, such as suspending standard judicial and democratic procedures, in order to realize a more just world.² We put these possibilities to one side in this chapter because they raise very general questions about issues such as democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, even if more radical and morally troubling options may be deemed permissible in an all-things-considered sense, they surely are far from optimal.

Locating the grounds for hope

What grounds the hope in renewal that has, to some extent, marked the debate over the COVID-19 crisis? We think there are two main sources.

The first source is the simple fact that the “disruptions to societal routines and expectations” wrought by crises “open up political space for actors inside and outside government to redefine issues, propose policy innovations and organizational reforms, gain popularity and strike at opponents” (Boin et al. 2009: 82). Such ruptures and dislocations to the *status quo* can, but do not necessarily, translate into significant political and policy change. Of course, this raises complex empirical questions, such as the degree to which and the causal reasons for which crises provide opportunities for social progress.³ Given our present purposes, we simply note the socially and politically transformative potential of crises—a potential to which the origins of the word

“crisis” itself testifies: the English word, deriving from the Latin *crisis* (‘decision’), has been used to mean “decisive point” or “turning point” since the early 17th century.

The second source is the transformative effect that such societal-level disruptions can have on how individual citizens understand their social world. The lived experience of the COVID-19 crisis—including the sense of threat and uncertainty it has induced and the enforced changes to all our lives it has caused—can have a profound impact on a person’s understanding of the world around them and her place within it. In her reflections on this revelatory potential of the pandemic, the writer Zadie Smith draws on an analogy with post-World War Two Britain when she observes that a crisis, such as a world war or a global pandemic:

“transforms its participants. What was once necessary appears inessential; what was taken for granted, unappreciated and abused now reveals itself to be central to our existence.” (Smith 2020: 14-15)

The idea of something that previously appeared inessential somehow revealing its hitherto concealed value (or vice versa) is suggestive. But how exactly does such a transformation occur, and how does it apply to a crisis like COVID-19 *per se*? Thankfully, we can draw on philosophical theory in order to build up a clearer understanding of both of these questions. As a first point of call, consider what L.A. Paul describes as *transformative experience*:

“When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an *epistemic transformation*. Her knowledge of what something is like, and thus her subjective point of view, changes. With this new experience, she gains new abilities to cognitively entertain certain contents, she learns to understand things in a new way, and she may even gain new information.” (Paul 2014: 10-11)

Paul's essential claim is that certain experiences can perform the epistemic function of transforming people's understanding of the world in significant, even if in specific rather than complete, ways.

The experiences forced on us by the COVID-19 crisis have engendered, or at least provided opportunities for, such epistemic transformations. For example, the governmental classification of "essential" or "key" workers during lockdown periods has revealed the gap between many of those we consider to be essential to the functioning of society, on the one hand, and how we value—in terms of recognition and recompense—these people's work, on the other. This revelation has changed some people's viewpoint, as Zadie Smith observes: "People thank God for 'essential' workers they once considered lowly, who not so long ago they despised for wanting fifteen bucks an hour" (Smith 2020: 15).

To see how such a process could work from a particular person's perspective, imagine a relatively privileged person called Zoe. Prior to the crisis, Zoe invests little effort in contemplating the predicament of certain workers. Insofar as she thinks about them at all, she thinks about them in relation to the economic function they perform for her; consequently, she resents their desire to receive more compensation for performing such a function. But during the crisis she comes to appreciate her own vulnerability and indeed her own dependence on certain workers—particularly, when this is highlighted by the fact that the government reclassifies such workers as "essential." This vulnerability makes her more attentive to these workers and their interests as people. This generates a fundamental epistemic shift in her perspective: she doesn't merely recognize her own vulnerability and dependence. Rather, she becomes aware of and sympathetic to *their* interests, including the risks they are incurring in performing their essential role during this time. Essentially, the transformation starts from seeing them as serving a function, then recognizing her dependence on them, and then—because of such recognition—appreciating their value independent of her

own interests. This warms her up to policies that could improve their predicament, not merely facilitate the economic function that they perform for her with greater ease and efficiency.

This example highlights that the relevant epistemic transformation takes place relative to the beliefs and knowledge of *particular* individuals. To be sure, that certain workers are fundamental to the smooth and productive functioning of our society may already be known in a theoretical sense having, e.g., been demonstrated by researchers. But an epistemic transformation—or at least an epistemic shift—still occurs when such knowledge becomes integrated into a particular individual's worldview.⁴

There are numerous other examples, in which essentially the same phenomena to the case of Zoe occur. Consider, for instance, the action that governments have taken to house rough sleepers in empty apartment blocks and hotels in order to prevent the spread of the virus. This action has starkly exposed the lack of political will to house the homeless in normal times. Seeing this reality has changed some people's view on whether we can simply go back to not providing for this group of vulnerable people after the pandemic—especially as more people will become homeless as the full economic effects of this crisis come to be felt. Similarly, the experience of living through lockdown has led some to better appreciate the value and difficulty of caring for children or elderly relatives all day. This experience has caused a change in their beliefs concerning how household and care-based tasks ought to be distributed (see Gheaus, this volume). Both of these examples involve a fundamental epistemic shift in perspective at the level of individual citizens, with the potential for bringing about social and political change if it occurs across a wide enough portion of the population.

Readers may resonate with one or more of these examples or have examples of their own. What we are interested in here is the more general idea that crises perform an important *epistemic function*, revealing to people that (some aspect of) the current system is untenable and needs reform. In virtue of this, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can make socially just policies—that

otherwise could not have been implemented—feasible. The reason for distinguishing the two sources of optimism in this section, then, is because the question we wish to take up concerns the relations between them: how might the epistemic value of a crisis (i.e., the second source) be enhanced or amplified so as to make the most of the opportunities for significant political and policy change that it has opened up (i.e., the first source) for the purpose of bringing about a more just society?

Direct salience-raising measures

One way in to considering how this value might be harnessed is, somewhat ironically, to reflect on its limitations. Only a subset of any actual population will have their social outlook appropriately changed in the light of the pandemic and the injustices exposed by their society's response to it. There is another subset whose worldview will remain fixed and resolute in the wake of it—or worse, will be transformed into support for more radically unjust policies like unwarranted military intervention or xenophobic policies. The fact that it is unrealistic to expect any crisis to transform everyone's outlook in the appropriate sense raises the question as to what actions we can and should undertake in an attempt to expand the reach of its epistemically transformative potential.

The case of Zoe shows that, whether the government intended or even might have wanted this to be the case, its designation of certain workers as “essential” caused particular features of our social structure to become salient. As a psychological matter, something is salient if it is prominent or otherwise noticeable as compared with its surroundings. In this case, social facts about who Zoe is dependent on (not just during the pandemic, but in normal times too) were given prominence in a way that captured her attention and, via a process something like the one described above, brought about an epistemic shift in Zoe. Individuals who support socially just policies might seek to perform a function that is somewhat analogous to the state's designation of key workers—by making certain social facts and injustices salient to other people in order to

instigate or influence these people's personal reflection on the crisis. Of course, attending to some relevant social fact does not necessarily mean that an epistemic transformation will occur. Indeed, this insight will have important implications for our analysis below. But we assume that at least some kinds of salience-raising measures make such transformations more likely.

The most natural suggestion is that such individuals should engage in efforts to make certain facts *directly* salient to others in the target group. For instance, by writing op-eds and blog posts, or using social media to amplify certain perspectives and findings, such as the racial disparities in the negative effects of COVID-19 (see Wolff and de-Shalit, this volume). Relatedly, perhaps, people should become involved in political action of various kinds. For instance, individuals can take part in large-scale coordinated actions like civil disobedience that perform the communicative function of making the questions and concerns raised by the crisis as clear and hard to avoid as possible within society. There are good justifications for such action (e.g., Brownlee 2012); though in the specific case of COVID-19, some of the standard forms of protest—namely those comprised of large gatherings—are ruled out, or at least are much more controversial, on public health grounds. Nonetheless, there are safe ways of engaging in coordinated action: Build Back Better, for example, is coordinating local organizing, virtual rallies, and the production of persuasive resources that can be shared with others.⁵

Such direct expressions of particular convictions, on either an individual or political level, are central to democratic life and are uncontroversial actions that individuals may undertake. But there are reasons to doubt that such actions will achieve their desired effect among those in the target group. One reason for this relates to the property of salience itself. The philosopher Bernard Williams captures the key insight in this way: “features of [a person's] environment display salience, relevance, and so on, particularly in light of what [one] sees as valuable” (Williams 2010: 82). Williams' essential point is that the core values that people hold act almost as a kind of perceptual filter. Consequently, we must consider how the subset of people whose outlook is not directly

affected by the crisis are likely to view such direct expressions by other individuals. Bluntly put: if the values that they hold prevent them from seeing what has been revealed or further exposed by the crisis, then (at least most of them) are unlikely to change their mind in response to other citizens directly expressing their different reaction to the crisis.

Indeed, recent work in psychology has shown not only that attempts to persuade people in this direct sense are much less effective than expected, but that they may in fact prove counterproductive. The problem with these forms of salience-raising efforts, according to this research, is that they are the most susceptible to “backfire effects.” A significant body of evidence shows not only that giving people strong arguments often fails to change their minds if people are motivated to reject the evidence (e.g., if it challenges some element of their existing worldview), but that such arguments can cause these people’s views to become *more entrenched* than they previously were (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010, 2015; Peter and Koch 2016).

These findings do not necessarily rule out the value of direct salience-raising measures. But they do highlight that such actions are likely only to affect, in the sense of facilitating some kind of epistemic shift, those people who are already somewhat predisposed to accept a particular view on account of their existing worldview. In her characterization, L.A. Paul is clear to state that, “For any epistemic transformation, the degree of epistemic change depends on how much the person already knows, and on the type of experience that is involved” (Paul 2014: 11). So, a person could come to know or appreciate something more deeply, i.e., gain additional information or insight, as a result of reading an op-ed or listening to another person’s experiences. The degree of epistemic change may be less in these cases, but we should not underestimate the potential ripple effects, politically speaking, of such changes. Yet, if we are to take the findings relating to backfire effects seriously, we need to acknowledge the limits—and perhaps even the negative consequences—of addressing these direct measures to some members of our target group.

Indirect salience-raising measures

This leads us to consider more *indirect* ways of trying to get people to notice and take account of what the COVID-19 crisis, and our response to it, has revealed about unjust features of our societies—or to put it another way, to make people more responsive to the evidence, as it were, that has been offered in favour of more socially progressive policies. One option is provided by a set of persuasive techniques that can be categorized as *epistemic nudges*. Epistemic nudging is defined as “the act of intentionally making use of one’s understanding of the cognitive processes and psychology of others in order to encourage them to form, retain and/or give up certain beliefs [or] epistemic dispositions,” while not precluding them from retaining or forming non-preferred beliefs or dispositions (Smith 2021: 151).⁶ So epistemic nudges steer people towards seeing things in a particular way, rather than directly confronting them with ideological convictions or challenges. Can this kind of influence be used in attempts to facilitate an epistemic shift in others?

Arguably the most obvious way that epistemic nudging might alter how a person sees a situation is by adjusting salience; for instance, “by providing relevant information via a means that can be more easily noticed, absorbed, and interpreted” by those one wishes to influence (Niker 2018: 159; see also Noggle 2018). Epistemic nudges take into account the fact that people’s background ideological beliefs influence how they process information. Using findings from the cognitive sciences, they provide a mean of presenting evidence in favour of just policies in ways that can make people more responsive to it. How an argument is *framed*, for example, is a factor that can significantly affect how people receive and respond to it. Accordingly, Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer have recently offered “moral reframing” as a potential technique for effective and persuasive communication across the political divide.⁷ This works by framing a position that a person would normally not support in a way that is consistent with her existing beliefs and values (Feinberg and Willer 2019). The aim is that, by making the reasons provided in the argument more salient to her, this reframing will positively affect the credence she gives to them.

In the context of COVID-19, consider people who resist initiatives such as Build Back Better and in general any type of policy that tries to improve the existing social net. One way of trying to reframe such policies is to present them not as demands of justice that people must accept but as certain demands that they should accept given their own commitments to, e.g., economic stability and prosperity. So, for example, perhaps they can be convinced that policies like Universal Basic Income and improved healthcare should be introduced in order to reduce the likelihood of massive social unrest—even a political breakdown—which would jeopardize their economic interests. The potential change that this type of epistemic nudge can induce is different from the deeper epistemic shift experienced by people like Zoe. Such moral reframing, if successful, does not make people come to appreciate the value of other people in independence of their own interests and values. But a significant shift still occurs in their political outlook. By reframing the situation in this way, it can make certain people come to see the value of, and thus be more open to, political changes that will in fact address some of the injustices and inequalities within their society.

Similarly, a person's response to information—whether she welcomes or rejects it as part of her deliberations—can be affected by *who delivers it*. We give some agents preferential access to influencing our belief-forming and decision-making processes, while we are primed to reject information—even the very same information—if it comes from some other agent. Sometimes expertise provides a reason to “pre-authorize” another agent, but often the most forceful motivating reason is that we perceive that the other person “has values, commitments, and goals that are similar to ours—that is, that in some meaningful way they share our worldview” (Niker et al., forthcoming). So, another nudge-style technique is to select mouthpieces for arguments intentionally so as to increase the likelihood that some subset of people will take notice.

Consider the case in the UK, for instance, in which Marcus Rashford—a top Premier League footballer at Manchester United—played a key role in forcing the government to U-turn

on its decision not to provide food vouchers to vulnerable children over the summer months. By sharing his story of how his family relied on free school meals when he was growing up, Rashford opened more people's eyes to the reality and extent of child poverty in the UK. Within a short period of time, his campaign had made it politically unviable for the government to continue with its policy, meaning that around 1.3 million children benefited through the COVID Summer Food Fund.⁸ Despite the fact that many others were campaigning for the same result, including education leaders, teachers' unions, and the Labour Party on the basis of well-established scientific evidence, this outcome would have been much less likely if it weren't for Marcus Rashford's intervention.⁹

Rashford's involvement, in itself, may not count as an epistemic nudge; his campaign was so effective because of how starkly it challenged a narrative within Conservative politics that "poor people are poor because they are lazy." But perhaps part of why the campaign was so effective at rallying popular support, in addition to Rashford providing a voice for marginalized people within society, was because certain people paid attention to the issue of child poverty *because* Rashford was talking about it. We can also easily imagine that some individuals, in an effort to bolster support for the policy U-turn, may have engaged in epistemic nudging by discussing or sharing Rashford's campaign with specific others *on the basis* of a judgement that his advocacy would make it more likely that their existing beliefs would be challenged or altered—and that this might, in turn, mobilise them to some political action, such as signing a petition to the government.

Both kinds of nudge work by influencing the credibility a person accords to relevant information—in the cases, information relating to the need to maintain or improve some aspect of the existing social net. The advantage of nudge-based salience-raising measures, relative to others discussed in the previous section, is that they are designed to avoid (or at least be less susceptible to producing) backfire effects, given the ways they address themselves to features of a person's existing worldview. But, in virtue of this, they raise some ethical concerns. Some worry, for instance, that these kinds of persuasive techniques are disrespectful because they attempt to manipulate whether and how a person engages with certain information.

There are different ways of cashing out this concern. On the first, critics claim that epistemic nudges “take advantage of non-rational features of our nature (such as our reliance on [...] the salience of options) to produce their effects” (Levy 2017: 498). Nudges are problematic, according to this line of argument, to the extent that they bypass our capacities for responding to reasons (see, e.g., Blumenthal-Barby and Burroughs 2012). But we can respond by claiming that epistemic nudges—at least those that work by adjusting salience—do not bypass our capacities for responding to reasons; rather, they *add* something to the deliberative process, namely, the sense that something is important (Noggle 2018: 166). This addition often serves to activate—not bypass—our capacities for responding to reasons. And the reasons we are responding to are, in a relevant sense, our own reasons.

But even if one accepts this, they may still think there is something disrespectful going on because these persuasive techniques are epistemically paternalistic. A practice is epistemically paternalistic when it involves “interfering with someone’s cognitive activities—primarily, with the conduct of their inquiries—with the aim of improving their epistemic position, but without their consent” (McKenna 2020; also see Ahlstrom-Vij 2013). We think there is an interesting discussion to be had over whether epistemic nudges (as a category) are epistemically paternalistic or not and, if they are, how this affects their moral permissibility. We recognise that there is some interference with a person’s freedom to conduct their inquiries in the way they see fit, as critics worry about, in the epistemic nudges we’ve outlined. What is less clear is that they are motivated or justified by the aim of making those interfered with epistemically better off. In the examples given above, some sort of epistemic shift might occur as a result of the nudge, but this need not make the person epistemically better off in any real sense. The nudges are performed for the sake of harnessing additional popular support for socially just policies. If they happen to make someone epistemically better off, in terms of holding more true beliefs (about what justice requires) for instance, this is a happy by-product. This diffuses, to some extent at least, the worry about epistemic paternalism.

Conclusion

After offering a partial philosophical explanation of why crises can induce rational optimism, based in the epistemic function that crises can play, we've discussed some ways in which individual citizens might seek to persuade others of the lessons of the COVID-19 crisis. We've focused our attention on a range of salience-raising measures and have argued that direct attempts to change people's minds, despite being uncontroversial ethically speaking, need to negotiate the empirical worry raised by backfire effects. Indirect measures like epistemic nudging, then, may offer a more effective way for private citizens to help certain people see the various insights that crises can make salient. We've diffused ethical concerns with epistemic nudges, but a practical worry remains.

In short, one might still reasonably question their ultimate value: how can nudging a few other people towards the light really make much of a difference; particularly if fundamental institutional change is required? We don't wish to over-emphasize what we think epistemic nudges can do. But, at least in democratic regimes, we don't think that their value should be underestimated either. In particular, even reaching a relatively small proportion of people through epistemic nudges might prove to be significant in reaching tipping point thresholds for supporting socially just policies. In this way, it is possible that epistemic nudges might serve as one means to securing the fundamental institutional changes that are required for bringing about a more just society.¹⁰

Suggestions for further reading

- If you haven't read it yet, Arundhati Roy's short essay "The Pandemic is a Portal" (in her *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction.* and also published in *The Financial Times* on 4th April 2020) is well worth reading.
- For more on backfire effects and the possibility that certain kinds of nudges might offer an option for increasing responsiveness to genuine evidence, see Neil Levy's short article in *Journal of Medical Ethics* entitled "Nudges in a Post-Truth World".

Notes

1. Which, in countries like the United States, often means losing medical insurance too.
2. For example, in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln decided to suspend the right of Habeas Corpus in response to the American Civil War.
3. For discussion of these questions, see Keeler (1993), Birkland (2006), Klein (2007) and Boin et al. (2009).
4. It is possible that updating her worldview in this way may be productive of other changes in Zoe's social outlook more generally, for example by highlighting tensions with other views she holds; but it need not be for the counting as an instance of the phenomenon we're interested in here.
5. See <https://www.buildbackbetteruk.org/start-organising> and a video that seeks to get across the main points of the campaign via an analogy, which revolves around the question: "What would you do if your house fell down?" (<https://vimeo.com/426904398>).
6. This definition captures the spirit of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's original definition in *Nudge* (2009), while shedding certain aspects of their characterisation which are not essential to the practice of nudging. For example, Thaler and Sunstein conceive of nudges as a public policy intervention addressed to a general population and undertaken by policymakers-as-"choice architects"; epistemic nudges, however, need not have any of these features and so can be used by anyone at the level of individual interaction (Smith 2021).
7. The insight at the heart of the technique, though, is not a recent one. In 1669, Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*: "It is necessary to have regard to the person whom we wish to persuade... what principles he acknowledges... and then observe in the thing in question what affinity it has with the acknowledges principles" (cited in Feinberg and Willer 2019).
8. See: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-summer-food-fund>.
9. What is particularly important about this example is that Rashford is a representative of a group of marginalised knowers. Leonie Smith and Alfred Archer suggest that "it is likely that hearing such stories from privileged speakers without input from the epistemically marginalised themselves may further epistemically objectify marginalised knowers as things to be talked about rather than to" (2020: 792).

10. We thank Katharina Bauer, Aveek Bhattacharya, Anca Gheaus, Julia Hermann, Leonie Smith, and Adam Swift, as well as audiences at the University of Stirling's departmental philosophy seminar and Modern Research Group for helpful discussion of the ideas in this chapter.

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