**Collective epistemic failings and the fragility of values**

*Institutional Virtues, Political Decision-Making, and Communication under Uncertainty*

1. **Preliminaries**.

I discuss the collective epistemic failings manifested in the lockdown policies enacted by Global North institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially among groups who should have been expected to be attuned to the harms of those policies.

Main points:

1. GN lockdown policies were known to have severe healthcare, social, economic and political harms, especially for marginalised groups in GN, and in the Global South.
2. endorsement of lockdowns required a complex array of collective and institutional epistemic failings, many sustained by deleterious cultural and political realities.
3. these collective failings help to explain the support for lockdowns of social groups whose professed moral-political values should have attuned them to their harms.

How to explain these failings? Answers focused on contingent features of late modern societies are important, but we should also emphasise also the **fragility of our values** and this should be understood in terms of a **misanthropic**perspective on humankind.

1. **The harms of lockdowns.**

*Lockdown* shorthand for school and university closures, travel bans, closure of non-essential shops and services, stay-at-home orders, constraints on social life, or some combination.

An enormous multidisciplinary literature exists which documents, details, and analyses the harms of lockdowns – their kinds, extent, causes, consequences – produced by charities, NGOs, academics, and other organisations.

In this section I want to indicate something of the diversity and severity of the harms of lockdowns.

An overview of some of the main kinds of harms of lockdowns, most ignored by Spiegelhalter and Masters’s [*Covid by Numbers*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwifqqm39_WEAxWDUkEAHQ0sDbYQFnoECCoQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.penguin.co.uk%2Fbooks%2F446585%2Fcovid-by-numbers-by-masters-david-spiegelhalter-and-anthony%2F9780241547731&usg=AOvVaw0wbKlD2syNOCJGnfuVV1cW&opi=89978449) and other discussions:

* delays to medical treatments, missed early diagnoses, the worsening of other health outcomes, and the neglect of a wide range of healthcare problems.
* increases in alcohol and drug abuse.
* ’long-lasting and era-defining’ harms to the educational, social, and emotional development of [children](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/harm-to-children-in-covid-lockdown-preventable-new-report-conclu), due to disruption of education, learning habits, increased absenteeism, and risks to children’s longer-term prospects.
* loss of businesses, savings, opportunities, and financial security.
* intensification of existing and persistent social and economic inequalities.
* restrictions on civil liberties.
* erosion of democratic norms.
* abandonment of governmental emergency management procedures and planning.
* increases in mental health problems, loneliness, social isolation.
* loss of irreplaceable life-moments.
* isolation of the dying from their loved ones, condemning them to die in misery, unable to conclude their life-narratives with dignity – “[protecting them to death](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi2u86M3fSEAxXFgv0HHdPfCBcQFnoECBAQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Flink.springer.com%2Farticle%2F10.1007%2Fs11097-022-09803-z&usg=AOvVaw1oQh6KnUVynnG9KHTUTYMv&opi=89978449)”.
* traumatic birth experiences.
* increased domestic abuse.
* disruption of vaccination programs in the Global South with associated outbreaks.
* abandonment of prior healthcare policy norms and standards.
* enormous increases in national debts.
* immense profiteering and cronyism – ‘disaster capitalism’.
* ‘the biggest upwards transfer of wealth in history in the shortest space of time’ ([Green and Fazi](https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/the-covid-consensus/)).
* undoing decades of global progress in healthcare, education, and improvement in the status of women.

Note, too, (a) different critics disagree on the nature, scope, and severity of the harms, (b) some harms are tied to conspiracy theories (the Great Reset), and (c) the harms have multiple causes including but not limited to lockdown policies, including [prior political incompetence](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwio6ZKg3fSEAxVv_7sIHWq7BJsQFnoECBMQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fharpercollins.co.uk%2Fproducts%2Ffailures-of-state-the-inside-story-of-britains-battle-with-coronavirus-jonathan-calvertgeorge-arbuthnott&usg=AOvVaw0hsKtX3nEGato69PRriT0x&opi=89978449).

Also note my points are [procedural](https://kiej.georgetown.edu/leaders-violated-epistemic-duties-special-issue/): collectively, there was a failure to systematically, carefully discuss lockdowns, including their actual, likely, and anticipated harms and questions of the [social distribution of those harms](https://kiej.georgetown.edu/predictable-inequities-covid-19-special-issue/) - compare **Silvia and Melanie** on inductive risk..

OK – consider some of the collective epistemic failings.

1. **The epistemic problems.**

Consider these social-epistemic problems concerning the harms of lockdowns:

* many of the harms of lockdowns were recognised in previous pandemic management policies and **precedent** and were a main reason they were never recommended.
* many of the harms of lockdowns were **predictable**, and [predicted](https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/vision/vision-child-adolescent-mental-health-post-lockdown), by researchers and workers in a range of academic disciplines, charities, and organisations.
* many of the harms of lockdowns could be ignored or downplayed because they are:
  + **long-term** – unfolding over the decades to come.
  + **intangible** – difficult to articulate and quantity ([Ratcliffe](https://www.academia.edu/55469652/What_We_Lost_in_Lockdown)).
  + concentrated on **marginalised social groups in the Global North**.
  + concentrated countries and communities in the **Global South**.
* many of the harms of lockdowns are **less salient** to the economically, socially, and geo-politically privileged individuals and groups driving responses to Covid-19.
* virtuous epistemic practice is often difficult, unwanted, and unwelcome, and can come at significant personal and interpersonal costs, especially in contexts of [disorientation](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjFsqyZlO2EAxWthP0HHbaiBUEQFnoECBcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fhal.science%2Fijn_03508068%2F&usg=AOvVaw0mjcZKKC4Q1tdyZ_pEk-UO&opi=89978449).
* our commitment to epistemic values is often far more **conditional** than we admit.

**But** these problems could, in principle, have been corrected (recall Maru’s talk):

* prior research and [precedent](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/03/17/why-didnt-pandemic-planning-anticipate-the-need-for-lockdowns/) could have been communicated and explained to public.
* warnings about predicted harms could have been acknowledged, shared, and put into political and public discussion.
* harms that are more difficult to detect, due to temporal distance or social specificities, could be described and emphasised in a contextual and holistic approach—consistent with [prior norms](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14616696.2020.1826555) of public health policy.

**Question**: why were these epistemic problems not corrected by collective-level epistemic systems and, especially, by communities who should have been attentive and concerned? Why were our epistemic problems accompanied by these epistemic failings?

1. **Critical discourse about lockdowns.**

There are many reasons why the harms of lockdowns were ignored, dismissed, downplayed, or invidiously justified by GN governments, international healthcare organisations, media and political groups and many others—too many to consider in a single paper.

**Specific problem:** the harms of lockdowns were not widely acknowledged or discussed by those whose moral-political values should have made them salient.

[Green and Fazi](https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/the-covid-consensus/) ‘baffled’ that leftists, like themselves, supported lockdowns, since one would expect leftists to be critical of Big Pharma, critical of policies disproportionally harmful to the poor, devastating for the Global South, concerned about mental health, alert to intimate connections of health and wealth in a neoliberal world – ditto [leftist human geographers](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367077499_The_academic_left_human_geography_and_the_rise_of_authoritarianism_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic).

Note (a) lockdown critics found across the political spectrum, and (b) not all are sincere.

1. **The suppression and condemnation of criticism**.

* The [**homogenisation**](https://fullfact.org/health/can-we-believe-lockdown-sceptics/) of the heterogenous population of critical voices (‘lockdown sceptics’).
* The **moralisation** of lockdown discourse and **demonisation** of critics (‘Covidiots’, [Sunetra Gupta](https://collateralglobal.org/article/sunetra-guptas-uk-covid-inquiry-witness-statement/)).
* The **politicisation** of critical discourse, especially within [polarised political cultures](https://fullfact.org/health/can-we-believe-lockdown-sceptics/).
* The failure to explore the concerns and motivations of critics ([Canadian truckers](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/19/canada-freedom-convoy-ending-but-issue-not-going-away)).
* The [social-expressive](https://philarchive.org/rec/HANDOB) and social-identity functions of defending lockdowns.
* The vastly powerful ‘herd instinct’ among people – groupthink, taste for orthodoxies ([Mormina](https://philpapers.org/rec/MORKEA)).

1. **The deficient discursive environment.**

* The continuous monothematic media coverage – decontextualised data, questionable modelling and projections, and [fear-based public health messaging](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666799122000211#sec0019) (‘nudges’, horrifying images).
* The constant invocation of crass ‘[following the science](https://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/blog/following-the-science-in-the-covid-19-pandemic)’ mantra.
* The absence or [marginalisation](https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4425) of diverse and critical perspectives.
* The conflation of the *pandemic* and the *policy* *responses* to it (eg “due to Covid”).
* The affective and social disruptions of lockdowns damaged our [epistemic abilities](https://collateralglobal.org/article/how-lockdowns-eclipse-the-harms-they-cause/).

**But** these explanations do not work by themselves: all of them could be resisted—an individual can retain epistemic agency even within a hostile social-epistemic environment and can – sometimes – exercise epistemic virtues of courage and perseverance ([Battaly](https://philpapers.org/rec/BATIP-3), [Kidd](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjYofWamO2EAxVEh_0HHTwVB2oQFnoECBsQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fphilarchive.org%2Frec%2FKIDECA-2&usg=AOvVaw0jg7dnD8qvYHzW9P5vb0s3&opi=89978449)).

Often, our normative values supply the essential motivation needed for kinds of **resistant epistemic agency** in hostile environments ([Medina](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-epistemology-of-resistance-9780199929047)).

So, how to explain the lack of epistemic resistance among expected resisters?

1. **The fragility of values**.

**Problem**: our commitment to normative values is (a) *weaker* and more *conditional* than we are accustomed to admitting; (b) they are continuously assailed and overmastered by our collective failings; (c) our social-epistemic world is [vicious](https://www.routledge.com/Vice-Epistemology/Kidd-Battaly-Cassam/p/book/9780367551155#:~:text=Alongside%20these%20foundational%20questions%2C%20the,and%20forms%20of%20closed%2Dmindedness.) and [epistemically corrupting](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwitiYqOxaD6AhXKfMAKHRYGDpkQFnoECAgQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fphilpapers.org%2Frec%2FKIDECA-4&usg=AOvVaw0MaG12kXEGnaYIT1RXlMyK).

**Proposal**: the fragility of the values that should have motivated various groups to critically scrutinise lockdowns is due to clusters of failings that can be explained in two related ways:

1. **Particularism**: explanations based on particular contingent features of the geopolitical, economic, and cultural arrangements of late modernity.

C20 intensifying political polarisation, ‘capture’ of governments by elite interests, philanthropocapitalism, ‘capitalist authoritarianism’, collapse of social solidarity, etc. ([Horton](https://www.wiley.com/en-be/The+COVID+19+Catastrophe:+What%27s+Gone+Wrong+and+How+To+Stop+It+Happening+Again,+2nd+Edition-p-9781509549092), [Arbuthnott and Calvert](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Failures_of_State)).

[Caduff](https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/maq.12599) on neoliberal health policies, authoritarian longings, zeal for modelling.

1. **Perennialism**: explanations based on perennial aspects of the human condition: there is a wide variety of failings entrenched and ubiquitous within the human condition and these motivate **misanthropy**: critical negative verdict on our collective moral condition and performance ([Cooper](https://www.routledge.com/Animals-and-Misanthropy/Cooper/p/book/9781138295940), [Kidd](https://philpapers.org/rec/KIDVOP)).

Some perennial human failings central to misanthropy:

* our selfish preference for policies that benefit us even if they harm others.
* our tendency to privilege our own interests and perspectives over those of others.
* our willingness to deploy power relations even as we publicly condemn them.
* our willingness to prioritise social conformity over moral and epistemic integrity.
* our unadmitted enjoyment of aggressively attacking, [shaming](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/covid19-and-shame-9781350283404/), and abusing ‘Others’.
* our susceptibility to simple stories and easy explanations.
* our willingness to turn away from disquieting realities in favour of convenient, comforting illusions and [bright-siding narratives](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/D03EBDAB-82D7-4B28-B897-C050FDC1ACB4/FeminismCovidSpecialIssueV20n1.pdf).
* our dispositions to [hysteria](https://harpercollins.co.uk/products/failures-of-state-the-inside-story-of-britains-battle-with-coronavirus-jonathan-calvertgeorge-arbuthnott?variant=39528280391758) and [myopia](https://thecritic.co.uk/issues/november-2020/welcome-to-covidworld/) (where one aim/value drives out all others).
* the [self-exempting tendency](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355329507_The_irrational_attempt_to_impute_irrationality_to_one%27s_political_opponents) to see failings in *others*, never in ourselves or ‘our people’.

Plus, the enormous, obvious, and often-overwhelming power in human life of greed, desire for power, selfishness, tribalism, indifference to suffering, hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and other failings central to historical and contemporary misanthropic verdicts on humanity.

For a philosophical misanthrope, there is nothing ‘unprecedented’ or surprising about these collective epistemic failings or the fragility of our values: there is a ‘fragility of goodness’. but no-one speaks of the fragility of badness.

Most of our values are in practice **fairweather values**: ones endorsed in ‘good times’, but quickly dropped once conditions turn bad, then re-adopted if conditions improve.

Our collective epistemic failings are not occasional, unusual anomalies that only occur under hostile conditions—they are integral to the very structure of contemporary human life.

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‘The incontestability of the existence of the virus and the deaths caused by it became wedded to a contestable political response, conferring upon the latter an illusory impression of inevitability and authority: *Covid* did this to us all. In this way, when the various harms of lockdowns were acknowledged and contemplated in any detail, they were presented as necessary harms, rather than reasons to question a contingent political response’ (Ratcliffe).

‘With the exception of behavioural psychologists seeking to control outcomes, the social sciences were completely ignored in the development of major policy decisions. There was apparently no place at the key initial meetings for economists who could contextualise the likely social and health impacts of a depression, psychologists who could understand the mental health burden and its likely impact on physical health, educational experts who could project the social and learning outcomes for children of the long-term closure of schools, development economists who could discuss whether lockdowns really were viable strategies in informal economies, or historians of previous economic declines who might be able to give an overall perspective’ (Green and Fazi)

‘Even accepting that Covid-19 deaths would have been higher without avoidance measures, it remains difficult to explain why Covid-19 prompted such a huge global response, including both lockdowns and massive vaccine development efforts, while the causes of mortality of a far larger number of children did not. These children are poor, and mostly of colour, while many (though certainly not all, of course) of those dying of Covid-19 are relatively rich. It is hard not to infer that wealth and power asymmetry has something to do with it […] Calling this the “result of Covid-19” is ambiguous between the impact of the disease itself and the impact of the measures selected to combat the disease’ ([Broadbent and Steicher](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwi1z4GtgfaEAxWgVUEAHZLqAm0QFnoECB0QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sciencedirect.com%2Fscience%2Farticle%2Fpii%2FS2590113322000049&usg=AOvVaw0nTS3guUd6VHbjArczeJ6X&opi=89978449))