



# One Bioethics for Covid 19?

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Only a few weeks into the Covid 19 pandemic of 2020, the disciplinary unruliness of the outbreak is obvious. A zoonosis, this Corona virus is thought to have originated in or near a seafood market in Wuhan, spreading globally due to the highly contagious nature of respiratory exchange among the human population. At its origins, the outbreak bridges public health to the food system. As significant of the virulence is, the socio-economic consequences of public health measures to curtail human-to-human transmission loom large. Some rebound back to the food system, as grocery stores have become sites of panic, restaurant workers are among the most severely effected in economic terms, and measures to limit travel across national borders have ignited fears among temporary and undocumented workers, many of whom are essential to the productivity of the agriculture in the United States.

The disciplinary organization of American universities has left us poorly prepared to learn from these events. On the one hand, the social scientists and humanities scholars who attend to social, economic and ethical dimensions of the public health crisis are ensconced in medical schools. To their credit, they have developed a robust interdisciplinary approach to their research. Economic drivers and impacts are observed with close attention to issues of structure and institutional organization, and philosophers attend to the ethical issues that pervade virtually every dimension of health care. All are more or less comfortable with the label “bioethics” because that is the way that medically trained specialists refer to a research domain that they have come to regard as an essential complement to their biologically based science. On the other hand, social science research on the food system is almost wholly disconnected from bioethics, with only a handful for researchers attending to links between diet and

health. Even they betray little cognizance that food comes from farms, while scholars who study the food system are dispersed across schools that do and do not have agricultural programs, and balkanized within departments of economics, sociology, anthropology and geography. Only the geographers appear to be taking an interdisciplinary approach, and even they seem reluctant to have much truck with the philosophers. For their part, philosophers squandered the early start afforded by Richard P. Haynes, founding editor of *Agriculture and Human Values*, to become obsessed with moral vegetarianism to the exclusion of every other issue in food ethics.

Is there any remedy? I have suggested One Bioethics (Thompson and List 2015; Thompson 2015, 2017). The idea borrows from One Health, an attempt to build better bridges between human and veterinary medical communities. The potential for zoonotic outbreaks is a centerpiece of One Health, so we can expect to be hearing more and more about it as the immediate crisis fades and learning from it comes to the foreground. Might it be possible for social scientists and humanists who work on food and agriculture to jump on this bandwagon? Could bioethicists in medical schools learn something from social and ethical research on the food system? Could those of us who study food learn something from bioethics? I hope that the answer to all these questions is yes.

## References

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