



# Social Distance Warriors Should Not Be Regarded as Moral Exemplars in a Pandemic Nor as Paragons of Politeness: A Response to Shaw

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Received: 29 August 2023 / Accepted: 5 December 2023 / Published online: 19 February 2024  
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**Abstract** In a recent article, Shaw contrasts his own supposed good behaviour, as that of a self-proclaimed “social distance warrior” with the alleged rude behaviour of one of his relatives, Jack, at social events in the former’s house in Scotland in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. He does so to illustrate and support his claims that it was wrong and rude to fail to comply with the governmental advice regarding social distancing because we had a responsibility “to minimize risk” and not wrong nor rude to challenge and cajole those people who failed to do so. This article shows that his claims are contestable. It suggests that his own behaviour was no better than Jack’s.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Coronavirus · Public health ethics · Social distancing · Pandemics

In an engaging article in this journal, Shaw describes how, as a self-proclaimed “social distance warrior” he acted in two particular domestic episodes in his home in Scotland during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. His own behaviour is contrasted, very favourably, with that of Jack, a relative, which is considered to be rude and unethical. This is done to illustrate and support the following claims. Firstly, he asserts that we had a responsibility to obey

COVID-19 rules in order to minimize risk. Secondly, he asserts that although it was by some “seen as rude to challenge people who do not respect those rules, ... in fact the opposite is true; it is rude to increase risk to others” (Shaw 2021, 589).

His arguments are not only interesting but important since the risk of future pandemics is perennial. However, the case he makes is unconvincing.

## The Domestic Episodes

Shaw writes:

[I]t was our daughter’s birthday and we had some relatives over for a mini-party (in line with the restrictions at force at the time). We tried to respect physical distancing as much as possible, but one couple didn’t sit together as planned, and at one point one of them—let’s call him Jack (not his real name)—asked to hold my phone to look at a photo, which isn’t advisable in terms of social distancing. These were very minor issues that attracted no direct comment, though he did look a bit grumpy when I refused to hand over my phone and showed him the picture instead. (Shaw 2021, 590)

He continues:

The next day we had visitors again. We were going to have a family dinner and had already

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decided that we would not sit at the table together but would instead disperse to eat in order to avoid sitting too close to each other. At one point before dinner I was sitting at a table playing a game with the kids, when I realized that Jack was standing right next to me, so close that he was almost touching. I immediately said “give us some space please.” Jack did not budge, except to glare at me from a very close distance. I repeated my request. He sighed, made a pained expression, then took a very small step to his left away from me—staying well within one metre. Raising my voice a little, I then said “take social distancing seriously” and he took another step. (Shaw 2021, 590)

Jack then retreated to the kitchen and complained to Shaw’s wife that Shaw had been rude to him.

### Manners and Morality, Etiquette and Ethics

Shaw thinks that Jack’s behaviour was in breach of the COVID-19 rules and was unethical and rude because it raised a risk of spreading the coronavirus infection. This seems to conflate ethics and etiquette, morality and manners. These are matters which, in my view, we should distinguish between. Although he talks about “rudeness,” which leads one to think of matters of etiquette, Shaw’s discussion seems to focus more directly on “ethics” and “morals,” terms which I treat here as synonymous. I make no distinction between “unethical” and “immoral” behaviour.

To some extent, etiquette and ethics are similar, overlapping spheres: for instance, they both relate to treating people with respect, but they are not the same thing. Unethical behaviour is not identical to rude behaviour. “Etiquette” and “ethics” are not synonymous terms. Not all human and social virtues are moral virtues. Think, for instance, of beauty and elegance. Behaviour might be very polite but morally wrong as, for instance, that of a confidence trickster.

According to Shaw: “it is rude to increase risk to others” (Shaw 2021, 589). This seems to me to be a whimsical claim. In general, there seems to be no systematic relationship between rudeness and risk to others. For instance, failure to say “please” and “thank you” to people on appropriate occasions can be very rude but will hardly increase risk to others nor will,

say, failure to address them by their preferred titles, names, or pronouns. In a sense, we increase the risk to others of injuring them if we ride on a bicycle on the streets or drive a motor car rather than stay indoors all day. However, it is neither unethical nor rude in itself to increase the risk to others of causing them harm. It depends how we do so. It would be rude—whether or not it would be unethical—to ride naked on a bicycle in the streets whether or not a naked cyclist is more likely to increase the risk of harm to other road users than a fully clothed one.

### An Evaluation and Comparison of the Morality of the Behaviour of Shaw and Jack

What Shaw calls “COVID-19 rules” were, at the time of the events in question, merely pieces of governmental advice. When they became laws, we had a *prima facie* moral duty to obey them because they were laws, whether or not they minimized any particular risk, but this *prima facie* moral duty to obey the law is not an overriding one. We do not have a moral duty to follow the advice that governments give us merely because it is governmental advice. On the other hand, if we have a moral duty to minimize a particular risk, we have a moral duty to do so regardless of what advice the government gives us and whatever laws it passes.

If, as Shaw seems to suggest, Jack and Shaw had an overriding moral duty to try to minimize the risk of catching and spreading COVID-19, both men were in breach of it. Jack should not have attended the house parties. Shaw should not have held them. In particular, he should not have invited Jack back to the second one if he believed that Jack’s behaviour at the first one gave him reasonable grounds for suspecting he did not respect social distancing.

Shaw created an avoidable risk of spreading infection when he permitted Jack to look at a photo on his mobile phone. Whether or not Jack physically touched the phone is not crucial. Infection was spread through droplets in the air from the breath. If he was near enough the phone to see the photo, he was near enough to Shaw to infect or be infected by him if Shaw was holding the phone. Indeed, anyone in Shaw’s house could infect or be infected by such droplets even if they were never at any time nearer to another person than they were advised to be. Physical

proximity was not the crucial direct causal factor but inhalation of infectious droplets.

When Jack stood close to Shaw at the dinner party and was slow to move away, Shaw stood his ground, while strict adherence to the tenet that we should do what is necessary to minimize the risk of spreading infection required him to move away. While he knowingly stood so close to Jack, it could be said that both of them were in breach of the government's guidance: that Jack was the immediate instigator of the breach is beside the point. Shaw should have moved if social distancing should have been taken strictly, literally, absolutely, and without any deviations or exceptions. Furthermore, he should not have spoken at all to Jack while Jack was in such close proximity and, moreover, he should not have spoken in a raised voice. Such behaviour increased the risk of spreading the infection, from droplets in his breath, if he was infected.

He gives as his excuse for not moving the fact that he was beside his children playing a game. I think that this was a reasonable excuse. However, it is a reasonable excuse, only if we accept that we and he and Jack did not have an overriding moral duty either to minimize the risk of spread of COVID-19 or to obey what he calls the COVID-19 rules.

It is misleading to say that obedience to the COVID-19 rules minimized risk. Rather, it might have reduced, say, the particular risk of spreading infection while, possibly, simultaneously increasing the risk of other unpleasant and harmful outcomes. It might have reduced the risk of spreading infection at the cost of the preclusion or reduction of other pleasant, useful, and morally laudable outcomes. As moral agents, our responsibility during the pandemic as at all other times was to try to optimize a range of risks that we took, given the range of differing moral duties that we held rather than to minimize any particular risk or risks. (McLachlan 2022)

*Ceteris paribus*, it is morally laudable, even if not always morally obligatory, to take what measures we reasonably can to reduce the likelihood of spreading infections that might cause illnesses and deaths. However, *ceteris paribus*, it is morally laudable to take quite different steps in pursuit of other ends. The saving of lives is morally good, but it is not the only morally good thing. For instance, the enjoyment of dinner parties and children's birthday parties is morally good. Not all morally good things are varieties of the same morally good thing. Different morally good

things are incommensurate. We are typically required to try to make choices that might produce more or less optimal combinations of different sorts of good outcomes rather than the blinkered maximization of one particular sort, whether or not we are in the throes of a pandemic (McLachlan 2012).

Jack had a moral duty not to catch or spread coronavirus wantonly or recklessly in the social episodes at David Shaw's house. There is no reason to think he did so, in my view. Moreover, in the circumstances, there were many other moral duties he had. There were many things too which were morally permissible for him to do which could bring pleasure to himself and others. He did not have a moral duty to do everything possible to try to avoid the spread of the infection, at the cost of all other considerations. He did not have a moral duty to take no risks at all of catching or spreading coronavirus. He had only a moral duty to take no unreasonable risks. What risks were reasonable and what were not is a matter of judgement and a matter about which reasonable people can reasonably disagree.

In my view, Shaw's behaviour was not, in terms of ethics, fundamentally different from Jack's. They both acted as if they believed that reasonable risks of catching COVID-19 were worth running even if they might have differed in their opinions about what particular risks were worth taking for whatever purposes.

### **An Evaluation and Comparison of the Etiquette of the Behaviour of Shaw and Jack**

Jack was rude when he was slow to comply when Shaw asked him to move. I suspect that Shaw was rude in both of the reported episodes.

Hosts are expected to make their guests feel at ease rather than to make them grumpy. Yet, when Shaw seems to make Jack predictably grumpy with his curious behaviour with his mobile phone, he offers no apology. He makes no attempt, it seems, to mollify Jack or to explain to him why he is acting so strangely. This does not seem like the behaviour of a jovial, convivial, and polite host.

Shaw's attempt to defend himself from the accusation of rudeness when it is reported to him by his wife was, in my view, counter-productive. He says that he asked Jack to move away from him altruistically, in order to protect Jack from possible infection from

him. Had I been in Jack's position, I would have been furious with Shaw for such patronizing behaviour. It is akin to saying: "Remember the government's advice on the safe level of alcohol consumption." Why should Shaw imagine that he knows better than Jack does what risks he should choose to run?

It is possible that "give us some space please" if said only once by Shaw, might have been plausibly interpreted as a (polite) request to be mindful of the government's guidance with regard to social distancing. However, it was not polite to say it twice and then say: "take social distancing seriously." This was more like an order than a request. The fact that Shaw said this to Jack in front of Shaw's children made the incident even more likely to be humiliating and embarrassing for Jack and made Shaw's behaviour even ruder. Shaw might well have been requested to take his responsibilities as a host and a relative seriously.

## Conclusion

Shaw does not establish the assumed primacy of an obligation to minimize the risk of spreading infection during the COVID-19 pandemic and the supposed exemplary nature of the behaviour of a true social distance warrior. It is far from clear that Shaw's behaviour, with regard to either ethics or etiquette was any better than the person he criticizes. He practices a less radical and blinkered version of strict obedience to social distancing advice than he advocates. It is misleading to say that he tried "to respect physical distancing as much as possible." However, he tried, no

doubt, to do so as much as was reasonable. And so, we might suppose, did Jack.

**Authors' Contributions** Not applicable.

**Funding** No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

**Declarations**

**Ethical Approval** Not applicable.

**Competing Interests** Not applicable.

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