

THE MASK AS METAPHOR: DEWEYAN REFLECTIONS IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC

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Volume 4 · Number 1 · 2020 · Pages 96-101

As I write this, many are raging about the need for every citizen to wear a mask. The science is fairly clear. Widespread use of face coverings would dramatically reduce the infection rate of COVID-19. What should be a fairly obvious protocol has become a matter of hot debate with anti and pro mask citizens using the mask as a metaphor for wider conceptions of character, social responsibility, and moral principle. Unfortunately, the conflict has become more than verbal. Enraged customers asked by store managers to use masks have committed assault in the name of their personal liberty rights. Notwithstanding soaring infection rates and hospitals swollen with patients, the President and many governors refuse to mandate mask wearing. This apparently simple measure, supported by science and commonsense, should be as sensible a mandate as seatbelt or food safety laws.

Pragmatists like John Dewey have long claimed that our philosophical conceptions have real consequences, in both personal and social dimensions. I use the controversy over masks as an occasion for philosophical reflection around three Deweyan themes, with the hope that this kind of reflection reduces, rather than adds to, that noise level in the public discourse surrounding masks.

The Power of Habit

Dewey's account of habits is central to his psychology, social philosophy, and ethics. Habits are complex socio-psychological entities that set patterns of feeling, thinking, and doing. Dewey notes that our habits "have us" as much as we might also say that we "have them." In fact, put more directly, a human being is a bundle of habits.

This account moves away from views that regard human beings as governed by a central executive function such as a "rational will" or "soul." Such views are both philosophically and scientifically dubious. We are not disembodied minds in bodies; but rather,

complex biological and social creatures who, while able to modify and adapt to new circumstances, are also deeply conditioned by the physical, psychological, and social forces to which our habits are attuned.

This realistic account of our habit nature is helpful to remember when we interpret each others' actions. It may seem simple to buy and wear face coverings, but we should, to some degree, acknowledge that habit's invisible grip hampers apparently easy behavioral adjustments. Think of the myriad tiny little behaviors built up over a lifetime of social training: tying shoes, yielding to yellow lights, shaking hands upon introduction, silencing cell phones in theatres, wearing sunglasses on bright days—the list is endless. These habits consist of micro-behaviors repeated in response to specific contexts and so they become powerful invisible wires. It is magical thinking, Dewey suggests, to just assume that a conscious intention to implement a new habit will automatically result in its production. Therefore, some level of patient tolerance is required when we see people without masks.

The Mask as Metaphor for Relationality and Responsibility

On Dewey's account, habits structure how we perceive and think about the world as well as how we act in it. Dewey helps us to see the continuity between the small-scale behavioral responses we usually associate with the term 'habit'—scratching itches, touching our faces, smoking cigarettes, wearing masks—with larger shared patterns of conduct. So, racism is a habit in Dewey's sense of a larger patterned way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Such patterns are transmitted through social practices and institutions. Our habits are means for accomplishing purposes, but they also operate "behind our backs" serving ends that we might not endorse or even consciously reject. Many habits that we believe we have shed actually live on as vestigial

structures that continually shape how we think and act in our social environments.

White people may think they are not racist but deep reflection may reveal all kinds of white privilege that they take for granted. As a white man, I take for granted my freedom to go for early morning runs before sunrise. While on a morning run, I see black man on a slow-moving bicycle up ahead in the dark. I become tense, fearing danger. As I get closer, I notice a young girl running parallel to him. It becomes clear that she is likely his young daughter training for some sport. He is there to encourage and guide her. This encounter encapsulates much about the invisible power of a socially created and shared racist habit.

Racist habits have been transmitted through formal and informal practices embedded deep within the social fabric of the United States. The privilege of exercising in the dark free of fear of harassment — especially by the police—is a white privilege. White fear of black bodies is another instantiation of the same racist habit. Democracy demands that its citizens face injustice by an honest reckoning of the pattern of habits that enable some social groups to enjoy power and privilege while others are exploited, marginalized, and oppressed. While not minimizing the difference in degree, the racist habit that triggers a white jogger's episodic fear of a black person in the dark is continuous with the very same racist habit that triggers white violence against blacks by police officers who automatically see black males as a threat. Changing these habits in meaningful ways requires much more than personal efforts to raise consciousness. They involve changing policies, laws, and social practices.

Responsible democratic citizenship requires acknowledgment of the dual social and personal aspect of habits. Social relations shape our habits. Yet at the same time we must strive to take responsibility for how our actions react back into those very same relations. Wearing a mask in a pandemic is a fitting symbol of this dual nature.

By wearing a mask, we acknowledge our very real—biological and social—connections to other human beings. The air that passes through our lungs is shared by those who share our space. Donning a mask to prevent possible viral particles from passing from our lungs to others is a vivid expression of social responsibility.

Although he is well-known for celebrating the habits that make for good inquiry--“intelligence” as he prefers to call it—Dewey also emphasizes habits of sympathetic care. Just as the father’s bike-riding is part of a responsible care for his daughter, so too is mask-wearing part of one’s responsible care for those family, friends, and strangers whose air and space we share. Apparently simple uses of tools, instruments, and clothing, reveal how we think, feel, and act towards our social world.

Atomized Versus Democratic Individualism

The furor over mask-wearing in a pandemic reflects larger conceptions of individualism that reveal much about contested matters surrounding rights, responsibilities, and freedoms — conceptions which manifest in reactive social habits. Dewey spent much effort deconstructing a misguided ideology of atomized individualism. This view, in rough, holds that individuals exist as fully formed atoms who enter social relations for mostly self-interested purposes. Atomized individualism emphasizes freedom from interference, the right to property, and a suspicion of any form of social coordination or cooperation.

Atomized individualism did make some sense as a political justification of freedom from the interference of kings and aristocrats who asserted undue social control over the liberty of middle-class property owners. Such atomized individualism, while perhaps an appropriate ideal for an 18th century context, is absolutely dangerous in a 21st century context with its global problems of environmental

crisis, racial injustice, and ravaging pandemics. Such individualism, like racism, manifests in vestigial socially harmful habits. We need a democratic individualism that nourishes habits of cooperation, care, and intelligent inquiry. It is not easy to understand the power and grip of the ideology of atomized individualism, particularly among economically disadvantaged citizens who are only hurt by the actions and policies that get justified by it. Such understanding requires empirical study that goes beyond philosophical reflections. Nevertheless, I venture a few suggestions.

Consider the deep fear of vulnerability created by the bombardment of warning signals, conveyed in a particularly rapid-fire way by social media. These warning signals often do indicate very real existential threats posed by climate change, economic inequality, war, racism, and now the pandemic. The beliefs that the government should leave citizens alone, and that one has little social responsibility beyond not harming others in overt ways like physical assaults, may be compensatory responses to the real fears of being out of control. Such beliefs console one that “individuals can go it alone.” It is possible that the extreme anti-government anger expressed in the name of “individualism” or “freedom” is a reaction to a vulnerability that becomes visible, when social discourses highlight forms of collective action necessary to remedy social ills. The angry are simultaneously refusing to accept their dependence on social actions and structures, and resenting (if only unreflectively) the knowledge that this dependence is necessary. I don’t know how far this hypothesis goes in explaining the furor over mask mandates. I do think they contain some possible insight worth further discussion.