

Morality and COVID-19: Abortion in the Shadows of Coronavirus and its Challenge for Moral Stances

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The issue of morality tends to be overlooked in the shadow of COVID-19 as people necessarily focus on the urgent issues of preventing infection, treating the sick, and finding a cure, while protecting the social order and economic well-being of society. And yet it would be a mistake to detach issues of morality from the way that society confronts the challenge of COVID-19. More importantly, there is a necessary moral element when, in the shadow of the COVID-19, political and other actors seek to advance objectives that are not directly related to the fight against COVID-19.

This contribution focuses on the way that morality, and moral thinking, becomes a necessary element in the way that it may be necessary element of the accountability of our institutional and political leaders. The illustrative case centers on abortion regulation in the shadow of COVID-19.



Politics consumes morality like any other factor in the production of power. Once consumed, what started out as an autonomous morality, expressed as its great principles for the guidance of a consenting community, is excreted by the body politic as a means to an ends, one achieved through the manipulation of the structures of power ostensibly designed to constrain the amoral exercise of politics, but that, in some cases serves as its catalyst. Political actors are not moral actors as political actors, though they may believe themselves moral actors within their moral communities.

Political actors are better understood as prisoners of the logic of the institutions into which they have (freely) inserted themselves. Those institutions have no morals. And whatever morals are supposedly embedded therein are turned to the service of the institution. It is in that engagement that such morality loses its character as morality and instead becomes an instrument for the cultivation of the power of the institution, and its reflection in the power of those political actors who can manage (and appear to control) the institutional *Weltanschauung*. That is, once consumed within political institution, morality loses its force as morality and becomes instead merely a specific expression of political power which can then be projected outward onto those who must be bound by its expression.

These were the thoughts that might intrude as one reads reports of the way that "Gov Greg Abbott has announced a move to ban most abortions in the state during the [coronavirus](#) outbreak, declaring they don't qualify as essential surgeries."¹ The reporting explained:

Attorney General Ken Paxton said Monday that the order issued over the weekend by Abbott barred 'any type of abortion that is not medically necessary to preserve the life or health of the mother.' Failure to comply with the order can result in penalties of up to \$1,000 or 180 days of jail time, Paxton said. 'No one is exempt from the governor's executive order on medically unnecessary surgeries and

¹ Valerie Edwards, "[Texas governor bans most abortions during coronavirus outbreak because they 'don't qualify as essential surgeries' - as Ohio considers following suit](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8147325/Texas-moves-ban-abortion-coronavirus-outbreak.html)," *Daily Mail* 24 March 2020. Available <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8147325/Texas-moves-ban-abortion-coronavirus-outbreak.html>.

procedures, including abortion providers,' Paxton said. 'Those who violate the governor's order will be met with the full force of the law.'

The issue also has also flared in Ohio, where abortion clinics received letters Friday from Republican Attorney General Dave Yost ordering them to cease all 'non-essential' surgical abortions. Yost wrote that the procedures violate a March 17 order issued by the state health director. However, representatives of Ohio clinics said that they were in compliance with the health director's order and planned to continue providing abortions.

Amid the moves by Ohio and Texas, a coalition of anti-abortion groups urged its allies across the nation to ask governors to ban most abortions on the grounds they were not essential. (Ibid.).

The action should be troubling for moral actors whether one embraces the position that abortion is a moral wrong, or conversely embraces the position that centers itself on the dignity of women in her relationship to conception as a moral imperative.

None of this is remarkable as politics; but it is worth considering as morals, or more specifically as the expression of morals through moral acts. These moral acts might be assessed by a simple measure—the fidelity of action to norm. And it is in that colliculus that the actions of these officials, falls short. Indeed, the morality of a politics of COVID-19, aligned with a politics of abortion (whether or not grounded in moral positions) might, as in this case, expose the temptations of immorality in crisis. The actions of the administrative and political officials of Texas and Ohio exposes the way that the morality of COVID19 responses also serves as a temptation to immorality, where temptation is understood a religious (and especially Biblical) sense.

One need not speak here to the morality of abortion, or even to its politics. Instead, the actions of these officials speak instead to the avoidance of both. If one can assume that the Governor's action is an immoral act to serve his version of a moral purpose, does that absolve the immorality of the path taken? One might think not. The act is immoral *as politics* if only because rejects fidelity to the core ideology of political action. It is an immoral *morality* because it compromises morality while appearing to advance it. A moralist cannot help but feel dirty (in the moral sense) in the face of this action—the act of turning a moral good toward an immoral tool to advance a (contested) moral purpose. The “feeling dirty” arises from the deception at the heart of the actions; and calls to mind the maxim of equity, that one who comes into equity must come with clean hands. The officials may praise themselves for their politics, yet that amounts to little more than a celebration of weakness, of the weakness that comes from succumbing to temptation—to the very rejection of the morals ostensibly advanced.²

It is that dirtiness, indeed, that diminishes the moral objective for which it was used. A moral actor opposed to abortion would find little solace in an administrative measure that continued to preserve abortion in a number of cases which that moralist would consider immoral. At the same time a moral actor who understands a woman's relationship to her body and conception as the central moral issue would find even less solace in an act designed to attack or challenge that moral position, but only sideways through the attrition of technicalities. That is by an act that appears to advance

² Job 1:8-12 (KJV).

the normative morality of those who hold life sacred on the basis of a premise that centers the health of the woman in its moral calculus. From both perspectives the consequential immorality of the political consumption of morality becomes clear. Its Satanic character (even understood as metaphor for a principle of inversion) becomes clearer as well—revealing in the political act the exercise of power without morals. What one has, in the end, is an expression of immorality expressed as the exercise of administrative discretion under cover of crisis. One ought to fear for their souls—even if the soul can be reduced to little more than the societally originating premise of fidelity to the organizational and moral norms of the community.

COVID-19, then, like Satan in the Book of Job, becomes the agency through which societal (and in this case political) actors are tempted under circumstances of stress, to reject the moral order that supports their political authority. To so reject is to reduce morality to a consumable and to acknowledge the amorality of politics—reduced to a vessel filled without reference to a moral (or in secular terms, a coherent principled) order. One does not deal here though, with a binary—black and white, moral or immoral. Instead one deals with the interaction of morality and expediency (the immoral as the means that ought to taint even as it advances).

The cover of COVID-19 to advance a moral position on abortion is merely one of an almost endless variation of the same challenge that is posed for political actors across the full range of the moral basis for the organization and political society. Yet it is instructive because the moral issues are fairly clear. The immorality of COVID-19 politics becomes murkier when, in the face of the pandemic, political, religious, societal, and economic leaders (those who exercise political authority over these sectors of societal organization) begin to use the cover of COVID-19 to reshape the core premises around which society is organized. Though there is nothing immoral about such reshaping, it is the deception, the use of the cover of COVID-19 as a means of hiding what is being done, that gives the politics of COVID-19 its fundamentally immoral character.