

# Statement on individual autonomy and social responsibility within a public health emergency

*World Emergency COVID19 Pandemic Ethics (WeCope) Committee (18 July 2020)*

As an independent, multidisciplinary and cross-cultural committee, comprised of experts from cultures and nations across the world, we offer the following recommendations on the concepts of individual autonomy and social responsibility in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Since the advent of modern Western bioethics, ‘autonomy’, generally defined as capacity to make informed decisions in relation to oneself, has developed as an axial ethical principle. Autonomy implies an obligation to respect. Autonomy soon became hegemonic in some contexts and thus underestimates other relevant ethical principles in our shared human existence, with great loss to our common morality.

One of the neglected ethical principles was responsibility, which is generally defined as the obligation to answer for one’s own actions and omissions. Specifically, social responsibility is the obligation to contribute to the welfare of a pluralist society. However, ‘responsibility’ has often been viewed from a narrow legal perspective, as ‘accountability’, as being the direct cause of an effect, acknowledging authorship, and being subject to the penalty stipulated by law. ‘Responsibility’ has a broader, moral meaning as the capacity to answer for what has been done, and also for what, while having the power to do it, was not done and what ought to be. For the purpose of this statement, “responsibility” is a function of moral agency and not a legal or political construct.

Individual ‘autonomy’ and social ‘responsibility’ have been too frequently perceived as opposed concepts and realities, as if being responsible would somehow restrain the exercise of autonomy, or as if autonomous individuals would somehow dismiss their social responsibility. This is what is still happening today, in the context of the pandemic in some parts of the United States of America, for example, regarding the use of masks, with a current strong movement against their use in the name of individual autonomy, totally discarding the whole notion of responsibility.

However, this has not been the common understanding of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’ outside modern Anglo-American bioethics. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as bioethics asserted itself globally, there was a broader reconceptualization of autonomy and a parallel strengthening of its relationship with other ethical principles, namely that of responsibility, such as is already stated in article 5 of the *Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights* (2005):

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“Autonomy and individual responsibility: The autonomy of persons to make decisions, while taking responsibility for those decisions and respecting the autonomy of others, is to be respected.”

The awareness that autonomy requires a proportional assumption of responsibility was thus globally recognized by all countries.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has confronted each individual with their own autonomous behavior and their own obligations towards society, aware that each person can affect the well-being of the community. Indeed, this pandemic, to which there is no proven effective treatment and where the control of the infection depends on individual behavior, has dictated the valorization of the community’s interest to the detriment of the individual’s, voluntarily or legally, also encouraging to reframe the concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’ and their relationship, within a global context of public health emergency.

### **1. The concepts: from a classic definition to a global understanding**

Broadly, ‘autonomy’ is the capacity and the right to make choices by yourself towards yourself; and ‘responsibility’ is the duty and the obligation to acknowledge agency or to be accountable for the consequences. The individual is the direct cause of something (effect), by their own decisions or actions, and thus becomes accountable for the consequences. However, this is a legal, narrow, definition; the moral, broader definition is that the recognition that the exercise of autonomy is always contextualized (and not abstract) and that responsibility also falls on what was not done but what could and should have been done.

Beyond the more general and formal definition of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’, developed by different professionals and scholars, it is important to recognize that the notions these concepts convey can also be expressed by other words in different cultures. In communities where these concepts are not common, the same idea may be present in other terms, and it is important to have this sensitivity to recognize those terms and how when they are culturally embedded also express the notions of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’. The concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’ can and should also be recognized in daily practice.

Recalling the example of facial masks, it is known that they have long been common in several Asian countries but were less used outside Asia. Today, it is recognized that the widespread use of masks creates two barriers to the risk of infection and therefore their use is highly recommended from a public health point of view.<sup>2</sup> In many countries where masks were not available, people started to produce them, with cultural meaningful colors and drawings, using their own resources and creativity for a common purpose.

A broad view on autonomy and responsibility allows, in the current pandemic situation and in the diversity of geo-cultural contexts in which it spreads, to engage people towards a greater awareness, both of what they can freely do and what they need responsibly to do.

***Recommendation 1: The concepts of autonomy and of responsibility should be considered in their broad moral meaning (and not in a narrow legal meaning), and***

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of the World Emergency COVID19 Pandemic Ethics (WeCope) Committee, *Wearing Masks and Face Covers as Social Responsibility during COVID-19 pandemic* (23 April 2020)

***in the cultural context to understand the different ways they can be expressed and the specific meaning they can acquire. In the current pandemic individual autonomy must be balanced with social responsibility to control the spread of the infection.***

## **2. The context: from theoretical requirements to everyday practice**

The definition of ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’ as moral obligations to be acknowledged by the self and respected by others is not enough for their true and effective compliance. Formal principles require material conditions to be fulfilled. These material conditions can include political (e.g. a dictatorship weakens both, the autonomy and responsibility of citizens who are expected to obey given rules), economic (e.g. low income people have to be totally focused in their survival and are not really free to make choices beyond their most basic needs), social (e.g. within some cultural and religious environments, people are constraint to follow what is traditionally established for them), educational (low level of education and/or lack of a critical mind narrow the range of choices and the awareness of responsibility) requirements. These different contexts influence the exercise of autonomy and responsibility. Also urban, rural, or tribal communities have different internal dynamics.

‘Autonomy’ is not only about making decisions freely about oneself, feeling empowered, and being self-confident; but also being free from fears that limit one’s decision, such as violence or hunger. ‘Responsibility’ is not just responding from one’s own decisions and actions; but also being cooperative with others, supportive at least among those close to you (a smile, listening, a prayer, are gestures of kindness available to all). Both attitudes admit different levels of performance.

In the context of a pandemic, it is important to adopt behaviors that are expected from each person as a contribution to the common good, and, above all, to urgently provide the adequate and necessary means for the exercise of both autonomy and responsibility. SAR-CoV-2 can infect everyone, but not everyone is equally exposed, nor does everyone have the same conditions to protect themselves. The pandemic has worsened inequalities, further compromising the autonomy and responsibility of the most disadvantaged, in this crisis as in the future.

***Recommendation 2: The exercise of autonomy and of responsibility require some basic political, economic, social, and educational conditions to be truly and effectively developed. Otherwise, people can neither be recognized as autonomous, nor can they be held morally responsible. In the current pandemic, basic conditions for the exercise of autonomy and responsibility should be assured.***

## **3. The balances: from a single pattern to a diversity of dynamics**

The current pandemic has revealed what was already a (underground) reality, hidden by the banner of hegemonic individualistic autonomy: individual autonomy is only ethically legitimate when exercised responsibly; likewise, responsibility can only be assumed if grounded in autonomy. Individual autonomy without responsibility lacks awareness and converts freedom into libertinism; social responsibility without autonomy can lead to violence and tyranny. Therefore, ‘autonomy’ and ‘responsibility’ are complimentary, insofar as they reinforce each other, and also interdependent, insofar as they need each other to both develop fully.

Indeed, communities are not built by a summation of single individuals. Communities are straightened nets of relationships where each part, each person evolves and defines itself by the relationships it keeps with different people and institutions. The whole is greater than the parts, the community is greater than the individuals.

The recognition of the other is the premise for self-recognition, and it is by participating in different collective works for the common good that individuals fulfill themselves. Relationships redefine the persons.

Therefore, the responsible exercise of autonomy does not diminish personal autonomy, but recognizes that each human being is constituted in his interaction with his community. There are many gratifying examples such as volunteering, giving blood donations, food banks, animal shelter, helping old aged people, and supporting public causes like environmental protection, reducing child labor, recycling of wastes, and so on. In the context of the pandemic, there has been many moving examples of persons who sacrifice themselves to help others: health professionals working far beyond their hours to take care of the patients; young people who satisfy some of the basic needs of elderly and others who are confined; or ordinary citizens who distribute food for those who have lost their jobs.

***Recommendation 3: Autonomy and responsibility should not be viewed separately. They are complementary concepts, and interdependent realities, so their respective exercise is reciprocally enhanced. The current pandemic has confirmed that true autonomy is always responsible and responsibility is only effective with consideration of autonomy.***

#### **4. The interdependencies: a responsible autonomy**

The recognition that both individual autonomy and social responsibility towards the community are inalienable and mutually reinforcing ethical requirements, leads to the imperative of assuming responsible autonomy in all circumstances, including the most demanding as in exceptional pandemic situations.

In the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the balance between autonomy and responsibility was put to the test from the beginning and at four main levels: isolation of patients, quarantine for suspects, population lockdown and social distancing. Each of these different levels imposed some sort of limitation to the individual's freedom of movements, always according to the needs of the wellbeing of the community, thus viewed as a personal contribution to the common good. The pandemic will eventually contribute to a greater awareness of the human condition of community and also global interdependence and thus to the deepening of our sense of belonging and duty towards society.

#### **Recommendation 4:**

***The exercise of responsible autonomy requires that each and every one recognizes the impact that one's choices can have in the community to which one belongs and to which one has duties. The current pandemic stresses the importance of responsible autonomy for everyone's life and wellbeing, as interdependent beings.***

## **5. The citizens' obligations developing a socially responsible individual autonomy**

Each person is also a citizen benefiting from the goods society provides and contributing to common good. Therefore, each person before acting, should check if his/her decision were to be adopted by all, would it contribute to a peaceful coexistence. Indeed, morality of individual decisions and actions depend on the possibility to become universal. This requirement applies directly to the current pandemic and addresses each of the following question: if my autonomous decisions and actions ought to be followed by all my fellow's citizens would my community be safer, healthier, and better than before? This is a question that each and every person is able to answer; and if they do it honestly, and act accordingly, then we would most certainly build a better world for humanity.

Different circumstances, such as the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, require different contributions. In this context there are key ethical principles and critical procedures that should be observed:

- rejecting a narrow and limiting self-centered attitude, acknowledging that no one lives alone;
- embracing an integrated vision of oneself, as belonging to a community and coexisting with other people, as well as being inhabitants of a shared world with other beings;
- adopting a global view of the world in recognition of the network of interdependencies in which we all live;
- requiring high-quality public consultation, with the capacity to identify misinformation, and promote interdisciplinary approaches;
- understanding that the current pandemic situation requires a more altruistic, cooperative and solidarity attitude;
- recognizing that strengthening equality, that is, equal opportunities to all, is a moral challenge that will benefit each and every one.

***Recommendation 5: Moral legitimacy of individual autonomous decisions depends on their universal potential to be adopted by all. Therefore, they ought to be altruistic, cooperative, and helping to strengthen solidarity and equality. These general requirements for moral behavior become even more important in exceptionally vulnerable and demanding situations such as the current pandemic.***

## **6. The states' obligations promoting a socially responsible individual autonomy**

States have the power and the duty to intervene in order to promote citizens' social responsibility, while protecting their individual autonomy, namely through the establishment of norms to protect public health, the supervision of their compliance and the penalty for non-compliance. Therefore, states should also balance the citizens' right to autonomy and the citizens' capacity to social responsibility when adopting public health measures, respecting individual human rights, evaluating economic and social conditions of the population to actively participate in public policies and also to comply with public health rules, and enhancing social justice. Each political decision should thus check, previously to become a rule, if there had been an opportunity to listen to all citizens, would it be reasonable to expect their agreement.

In this context there are key ethical principles and critical procedures that should be observed:

- respect for human rights (for the three first generations of Human Rights) as the common morality worldwide;
- accuracy, taking well-informed decisions, relying on the best scientific knowledge and evidence;
- proportionality when limiting, provisionally, individual rights on behalf of the common good;
- equity or fairness in distributing burdens and benefits;
- truthfulness on the presentation of facts and doubts, probabilities and predictions;
- transparency over the definition of criteria and their implementation;
- open communication fostering a broad dialogue and enhancing a pluralistic debate;
- accountability for the decisions taken and the actions implemented.

***Recommendation 6: The moral legitimacy of political decisions depends on their consensual acceptance. Therefore, they ought to respect human rights, be accurate, proportionate, fair, truthful, transparent, inclusive, accountable. These general requirements for an ethical public policy become even more important in exceptional situations as the current pandemic, where some human rights can be provisionally limited on behalf of the common good.***

## **7. The international community's obligations to enhance globally responsible cooperation**

States have the responsibility to work together, to cooperate and act solitarily, mostly when facing global problems, as a pandemic. This pandemic affects all human beings in the world. Although every person can be infected, the living conditions of any person may make others susceptible to infection, severe harms, and less likely to receive medical care, and to benefit from economic assistance, and less resourceful to overcome the crisis, etc. Therefore, international solidarity, at the medical, economic and social levels can contribute to the access of all people to a basic package of emergency help. Moreover, the huge endeavor to create a vaccine against the coronavirus and a safe and efficient treatment for COVID-19 can only be accomplished in a reasonable time frame through international cooperation, at the scientific level.

***Recommendation 7: Sovereign states have the obligation to cooperate with one another, at all possible levels, to contribute to global justice. In the current pandemic, all states should cooperate to the extent of their capabilities, in finding a drug or vaccine against COVID-19, and these therapies, once discovered, should be accessible to all who need them.***

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