The Power of “We” in the Time of COVID-19

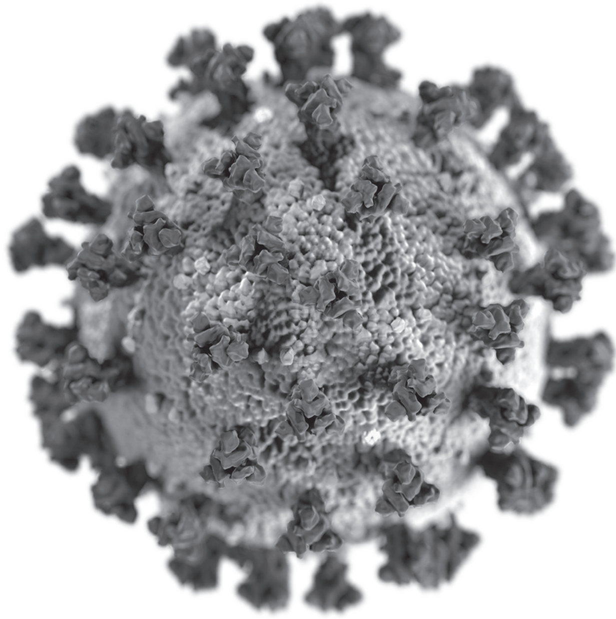
Katharine Browne

The Problem

As I write this, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. Over 2 million people have been infected with COVID-19, 125,000 have died from it, and numbers continue to rise. The burden on healthcare systems is immense. So too are the costs to individual liberty. Schools and workplaces have been closed, public events canceled, travel restrictions imposed, millions of people quarantined, entire countries locked down. Individuals are being asked to do their part to help curb the spread of the virus. How these measures are enforced varies across countries. At one end of the spectrum, we have the Swedish model, which is essentially (barring the ban on large public gatherings) to continue life as usual and to suggest – but not enforce – guidelines for conduct. At the other end of the spectrum, countries like China and India have implemented strict lockdowns, with fines, threats of imprisonment, and humiliation tactics in order to ensure their citizens comply.

The success of measures designed to protect public health and welfare requires that enough people do their part, by avoiding travel, staying away from public areas, practicing social distancing, wearing masks, and not hoarding toilet paper. But securing compliance is difficult because of an apparent tension between an individual’s narrow self-interest and the public good. We’re all better off if most or all people cooperate by complying with COVID-19 regulations, but there are individual incentives to defect. Consider the following examples:

1. A woman hides her symptoms of COVID-19 in order to board a flight back from Europe to Canada. Knowing that borders are closing and flights becoming more limited and expensive, she fears that if she waits until recovery it will be too late for her to return. While it is to her benefit to board the flight, she puts those she comes into contact with at risk.
2. Young and healthy persons ignore calls to social distance and decide to go to the beach. They might assume the risk of contracting COVID-19 (or experiencing complications from it) is slim, and if everyone else stays home, they will not harm anyone. But if many people ignore social distancing, the virus will spread.
3. A business decides to keep its doors open, despite calls for non-essential business closures. Forced to choose between bankruptcy and compliance with regulation, it reasons that remaining open will not be the reason why the curve is not flattened. Of course, if many businesses do the same, the curve will spike.



SARS-CoV-2 virus
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / Alissa Eckert, MS; Dan Higgins, MAM

4. A customer adds an extra package of toilet paper to his grocery cart. His purchase of the additional package isn't enough to deplete the resource. However, if many do the same, stocks will be depleted.

The stage is thus set for a "tragedy of the commons." Garrett Hardin's[1] illustration of this features a common land upon which a town's farmers can each graze a given number of their herd without depleting the resource. But each farmer will also have an incentive to graze one additional animal, since doing so will yield them an additional fattened animal to bring to market. And while the addition of the one animal by the one farmer isn't enough to deplete the resource, the addition of one animal from each farmer will. We thus arrive at the tragic outcome: the combined actions of each farmer, seeking what is best for themselves, results in an outcome that is worse for all. And in our current situation, the combined actions of each individual, seeking what is best for themselves, results in the spread of disease.

The stage is thus set for a "tragedy of the commons."

A Solution

One way to resolve compliance challenges like the above – and to avoid the tragedy of the commons – is to make non-compliance unattractive. This was Hobbes's solution. Hobbes thought that the unrestrained pursuit of individual self-interest would lead to a situation that was worse for all. His ultimate solution was to invoke a sovereign, with absolute authority to enforce laws. It did so through punishment and the threat of being cast out of civil society.

Hobbes endorsed a picture of human motivation that aligns with the rational actor model – *Homo economicus* – central to classical economic theory. On this view, rational agents are those who pursue and maximize their narrow self-interest. Policies informed by this model will often employ "carrots and sticks" to motivate the desired behaviour of individuals. In the current pandemic, the use of sticks is exemplified by the incredibly heavy-handed interventions of countries like China and India. We also see this in Canada to a lesser degree, with the increasing implementation of fines and penalties for individuals and businesses who ignore COVID-19 orders.

But there are a number of reasons to be wary of solutions of this kind. The successful implementation of sanctions requires heavy monitoring of individual behaviour, which is

costly, raises significant privacy concerns, and sometimes leads to corruption of those who are tasked with enforcing regulations. Furthermore, all restrictions in place are significant infringements on individual liberty. This requires justification and it would be desirable if the behaviour sought could be achieved through milder measures that rely on the voluntariness of citizens.

Not only are there undesirable effects of employing solutions informed by the selfish actor model, but doubt can be raised about both the descriptive and prescriptive adequacy of the model itself. Evidence from behavioural economics reveals that the majority of individuals cooperate at much higher levels than is predicted by the selfish actor model. There is also evidence that the typical incentive structures that accompany the selfish actor model often lead to undesirable results, by crowding out intrinsic motivations. One such example is a daycare in Israel, where parents were coming late to pick up their children. The director decided to implement a fine for tardiness. Rather than reducing the number of latecomers, the implementation of fines had the opposite effect, and the rate of late-arriving parents rose significantly.

In Switzerland, citizens were consulted about whether they would be willing to host a nuclear waste dump site in their community. When no incentive was offered, 50% of those surveyed said that they would be. But when asked if they would be willing to take 6 weeks wages in compensation for having a nuclear waste site in their community, the number of willing residents declined by half.

One way to explain these results is that the introduction of an economic incentive "crowds out" other motivations that individuals might have to either pick up their children on time (as good parents should) or be willing (as good citizens would) to have a dump site in their neighbourhoods.

> The central difference between the old GM plant and the NUUMI [New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.] plant was in their management structure.

There are further examples from industry where reliance on incentives, sanctions, and monitoring yields inferior results. In the early 1980s, after a long history of low productivity, low quality products, and low employee job satisfaction, a GM plant in California shut down operation. Shortly thereafter it entered a venture with Toyota called the New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI). Under this new merger, GM provided the plant and Toyota took over management. Two years later, the factory reopened. The workforce was left largely unchanged. But there was a dramatic increase in productivity, quality of output, and employee satisfaction. In fact, this new plant quickly took top spot among all other GM plants in the United States.

The central difference between the old GM plant and the NUUMI plant was in their management structure. At the GM plant, employees were given strict, detailed instructions on how tasks had to be performed. Performances were timed and heavily monitored. Under Toyota's management, by contrast, employees were organized into small collaborative teams, each with a team leader. Each team was given significant freedom to decide together on how to best carry out the task at hand. Toyota's success in the automotive industry has been attributed to its innovation in management – and to its shift away from the GM assembly line model and presumption of self-interest to an emphasis on other values such as teamwork.

Advances in evolutionary theory also challenge the selfish actor model. A central puzzle

for evolution has been to explain how "altruism," understood in the biological context to impose a fitness cost on its actor and confer a benefit to its recipient, could have evolved in nature. Given that natural selection selects against fitness-decreasing traits, it seems that altruism – the disposition to sacrifice oneself for the good of the others – ought to have been eliminated.

Darwin suggested that traits that work to the detriment of the individual could evolve if they were traits that benefitted the group to which that individual belonged. According to this hypothesis (known as "group selection"), some behaviours or traits evolved because members of groups containing those traits did better than members of groups that did not. While altruistic behaviours may be individually disadvantageous compared to selfish behaviours at the individual level, groups of altruistic individuals will be at a selective advantage over groups of selfish individuals. Group selection has in recent years undergone a revival, thanks largely to the work of David Sloan Wilson.[2] The emerging picture of humans is as a cooperative species, whose success is owed to a psychology with altruistic elements that allows and encourages them to live together in groups.

Darwin suggested that traits that work to the detriment of the individual could evolve if they were traits that benefitted the group to which that individual belonged.

From "I" to "We"

If *Homo economicus* is flawed, is there a suitable replacement? One promising alternative theory that has gained some traction in the economic and philosophical literature is the theory of team reasoning, most notably endorsed by the late Michael Bacharach.[3] Proponents of team reasoning claim that the theory promises to explain why individuals cooperate in experimental settings and, thus, fill the explanatory gap left by the selfish actor model. In addition to its greater explanatory power, it also promises to generate better (i.e., more cooperative) social outcomes without relying on the typical incentive structures that accompany the selfish actor model. More specifically, when individuals engage in team reasoning, cooperative outcomes become available where they otherwise would not be.

The basic idea behind team reasoning is that individuals are capable of reasoning in two different modes: the I-mode and the We-mode. When agents reason in the I-mode, they reason as *Homo economicus*, and maximize their own expected utility. This, as we have seen, leads to conflicts between individual reason and the public good. When agents reason in the We-mode, by contrast, they adopt the perspective and preferences of the group with which they identify. Rather than asking "What should I do?" team reasoners ask "What should we do?"

When characterized in the "we" frame, we can see how we might arrive at the cooperative outcomes in a range of public health dilemmas. When my aim is to maximize what is best for me, I might be tempted to ignore public health requirements. But when my aim is to maximize what is good for the group, I should comply, since doing so yields a better outcome for the group. While it might be the case that I should board the flight, we should stay home when we are ill. While I should buy the extra package of toilet paper, we should each only buy what we need. In short, this shift in agency from "I" to "we" helps to remove the tension between individual interest and the common good. While *I* should defect in public health dilemmas, *we* should cooperate.

According to Bacharach, whether individuals make the shift in agency is a matter of brute psychological framing. When an agent team reasons, he or she has adopted the "we" frame. The adoption of this frame happens as a result of being primed by features of one's environment. We thus arrive at a model for why individuals will cooperate some of the time and defect at other times: in the former case, they have adopted the "we" frame and are reasoning as a team; in the latter case, they are in the "I" frame and are reasoning as individuals.

Practical Applications

There are promising practical applications of we-mode thinking. Given that we-mode thinking leads more readily to cooperative outcomes than does I-mode thinking, those who want to encourage cooperation should encourage we-mode thinking.

We can here look more closely at some of the chief elements of team reasoning and the conditions under which individuals might engage in it. Team reasoning begins with group identification. An individual must see herself as a member of a group (or team). When an individual identifies as a member of the team, then she will determine which action she should perform in order to achieve the goal of the team.

Group identification can be fostered in a number of different ways. Bacharach thought that certain choice situations were more likely to prime the we-frame (or cause an individual to see herself as a member of a team) than others. He thought that choice situations where there was what he referred to as "scope for common gain" were particularly we-priming. Situations of this sort are those where the parties involved can mutually gain by cooperating. Public health dilemmas have this feature. One might, then, find ways of highlighting this aspect of the choice situation. Indeed, we see this in sayings like "together, we are stronger," which can help to underline the mutual benefits of cooperation and potentially prime the we-mode.

Communication is another factor that may help to foster group identity. In experimental settings, cooperation levels rise when individuals are able to discuss beforehand whether or not they will cooperate. This, in part, might be due to an increase in group identification. In the current context, social media and other virtual communication platforms can take the place of face-to-face communication.

In her Nobel Prize-winning work, Elinor Ostrom generalized a set of design principles for well-functioning groups, based on her research concerning how groups managed common pool resources without succumbing to the tragedy of the commons.[4] One such principle is "clearly defined group boundaries." Such a principle is likely crucial for group identity. With this comes the danger of between-group conflict, but so too do possibilities of within-group cooperation.

A second design principle that Ostrom identified is monitoring. This can help to secure what is of special importance to the success of team reasoning, namely assurance that others also identify as group members. Doing one's part to promote the aim of the group is ultimately useless unless others are likewise doing their part. Such assurance can also be gained through displays of group solidarity. We see this in the use of slogans, such as "We're all in this together," "United apart," and Germany's "Wir vs Virus" (We vs. the virus) campaign. We see this also in the 7 p.m. evening cheers for healthcare workers. Such displays help to foster a feeling of community, solidarity, and appreciation for those who are working hardest towards the common good.

The above is not intended to be an exhaustive list of keys to cooperation or how to solve all problems of compliance. There is no one size fits all solution. Moreover, there may be other ways of securing cooperation without relying on team reasoning by, for example, relying on the natural impulses towards altruism that some might have. Team reasoning does, however, seem particularly well suited to address dilemmas – like the one we are now facing – that require the collective efforts of others to resolve.

If we accept the team reasoning framework, it is also important to note that some cultures

will likely tend towards team reasoning more readily than others. Countries like Norway, for example, where a strong sense of community is instilled early on and fostered through such community-based volunteer traditions known as "dugnad," will presumably have an easier time adopting the we-mode than, say, countries like the United States that embrace individualism.

Reports of beach and partygoers amid the pandemic, businesses violating rules of closure, individuals violating quarantine orders, and people hoarding toilet paper reveal that we cannot always be counted on to do what is best for the group. But it is important to also recognize that many people have not only accepted the limitations imposed on them voluntarily, but have displayed exceptional kindness and cooperation. And if it is true that modes of reasoning are dependent on framing, the mode that prevails in the end – the "I" or the "we" – will depend largely on the choices that are made, both by policymakers and members of the public.•

References

1. Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162(3859): 1243-1248.

2. Sober, E. & Wilson, D.S. (1999). *Unto others: The evolution and psychology of unselfish behavior* (No. 218). Harvard University Press.

3. Bacharach, M. (2006). *Beyond individual choice: teams and frames in game theory*. Princeton University Press.

4. Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

***Katharine Browne**, PhD, is a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy at Langara College. Her main research interests are in theories of cooperation and rational choice, and her most recent application of this work is to vaccination policy and public health.*

Enrich your life and the lives of others by becoming a Humanist Officiant.

Would you like to officiate at weddings, baby namings, memorials, or other life events?

Humanist Canada will provide the training and certification you need for a rewarding career as a licensed Humanist Officiant.

Contact us to learn more: info@HumanistCanada.ca