What We Lost in Lockdown

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This chapter investigates a pervasive sense of loss experienced by those whose *life-possibilities* were curtailed due to social restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people, I suggest, experienced a loss of significant possibilities, which were—in some cases—integral to *who* those people were and who they sought to become. This widespread loss of possibilities, which is not captured by talk of "delaying" things or putting them "on hold" for a while, should be acknowledged by any attempt to assess the benefits and harms of lockdowns. I conclude by raising the concern that one-dimensional messaging led to a decontextualized evaluation of lockdowns, removed from a larger conception of what is of importance in our lives.

A Life of Possibilities

During the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme social restrictions have been accompanied by frequent talk of delaying things, putting life on hold for a little longer, and maintaining self-discipline for now so that we can eventually get back to normal. As the days, weeks, and months of "lockdown" (by which I mean combinations of stay-at-home and work-from-home orders, school-closures, and closure of non-essential retail and hospitality) stretched out ever-longer, talk of mere delay and of being able to *do it all again*, became increasingly removed from the realities of many people's situations. A human life is not something that can simply be put on standby for an extended duration and then switched back on without consequence; there is much that cannot be recovered.

It is debatable whether lockdowns will ultimately have saved or cost lives, and what applies to some countries, states, and regions will not apply to all. However, in deciding whether to implement such measures and later evaluating their impact, it is at least clear that costs of lockdowns need to be made explicit alongside any anticipated benefits. In doing so, it is also important to consider the global situation, rather than adopting an exclusively national perspective. Even if one or more lockdowns are judged to have succeeded in their local aims, it is arguable that their combined impacts on the world's poorest people have been and will continue to be devastating (Green, 2021).

In what follows, I will draw attention to an important cost of lockdowns that has not, in my view, been adequately acknowledged: what I will refer to as the *loss of life-possibilities*. The nature of this kind of loss is not fully captured by references to more specific, concrete losses, thus rendering it difficult to articulate. It is also difficult to incorporate into a cost-benefit analysis, given that (a) it cannot be measured in a straightforward way, and (b) it has involved the undermining of deeply-held values that would ordinarily be presupposed by such assessments. I conclude by offering a tentative account of how this undermining has occurred, suggesting that intensive, monothematic messaging has gripped us in such a way that measures taken to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2 have been evaluated in isolation from wider concerns.

When attempting to convey the kind of privation that I am concerned with here, it is easy to go awry. For example, following a televised debate that took place in the UK in January 2021, Lord Sumption received widespread criticism for maintaining that all lives are *not* of "equal value" and that the needs of the young should be prioritized over those of older people. One reason his point was met with disapproval is that it was also taken to encompass younger people with serious health conditions (although Sumption subsequently made clear that this was not what he had intended at all). But others "shuddered" at the more general claim that not all lives are equal.[1] I suspect, though, that the point Sumption was trying to make can be conveyed in a different way. If we consider a human life as something that resides wholly in the present, it is at least morally uncomfortable to maintain that "Person A at this moment" is of less value than "Person B at this moment", in light of A's being significantly older. However, in addressing whose needs ought to be prioritized, we could think of a human life as a temporally extended process stretching from birth to death, rather than a present snapshot. A life-course has a temporally organized structure, which ordinarily involves pursuing projects and pastimes, sustaining commitments, and building upon one's achievements. When thinking in terms of the whole, we see that prioritizing the needs of Person A over those of B can involve denying B certain important opportunities that were available to A, opportunities that may well be of consequence for the overall trajectory of a life. Hence, valuing both lives equally over the long-term is consistent with prioritizing the needs of "B at the present moment" over those of "A at the present moment".

[1] For subsequent media coverage, see, for example, https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/jan/17/jonathan-sumption-cancer-patient-life-less-valuable-others (last accessed 13th September 2021).

Of course, the issue only arises in circumstances where B really does stand to lose important opportunities, rather than merely having to put some things on hold for a while and make other minor sacrifices. But many people have indeed suffered such losses. Indeed, if my interpretation of Sumption's remarks is broadly right, they point beyond the issue of what one subset of the population stands to lose compared to another, and towards a more general concern that applies to young and old alike. In contemplating the effects of lockdowns, human lives can be thought of as temporally-organized, fragile processes. We are not enduring entities that might be stored away for a while like possessions in a drawer, to be retrieved largely unscathed at a later date. Central to the living of a human life, and equally to the *experience of living*, is—for the majority of people—the pursuit and actualization of significant possibilities that reflect organized arrangements of projects, cares, concerns, commitments, relationships, and pastimes (in short, our values).

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1989) suggested that there is an important sense in which we *are* our possibilities. Sartre's claim is phenomenological in nature—it concerns how we *experience* ourselves and our surroundings. Ordinarily, we do not start off by surveying a value-free, objective realm and only then proceed to assign significance to the various things that surround us. Instead, we encounter things as immediately significant to us; they matter to us in a range of ways. For example, as I write these words, the keyboard in front of me, the screen, the paper with notes scribbled on it, and other items of equipment together constitute a practically meaningful whole that reflects the nature of my current project. Insofar as these things appear significant to me, they also captivate my attention and elicit situationally appropriate activities.

Now, the ways in which things appear significant to us and how they engage us practically are not to be accounted for merely in terms of how particular entities look to us in the present and how we respond to them. Rather, we experience our surroundings as a coherent, practically meaningful whole, and we do so in light of enduring habits, expectations, projects, commitments, cares, and concerns. To a large extent, how something currently matters to us is a reflection of our longer-term values. What worries, threatens, saddens, excites, or enthralls us hinges on what we already care about. If someone really did value or care for absolutely nothing, then no situation they encountered would matter to them. In contrast to this, human experience generally involves experiencing and engaging with dynamic arrangements of unfolding possibilities, which relate to more stable backgrounds of values.

The relevant aspect of experience is more readily apparent when we reflect on circumstances that involve its erosion or disruption. People with diagnoses of severe psychiatric illness sometimes describe a world devoid of practical significance, which appears strangely distant, somehow unreal. In conjunction with this, they might report feeling profoundly diminished as a person, no longer fully alive. Sometimes, such experiences are described with explicit reference to the loss of types of possibilities that were once taken for granted. Consider, for example, the following first-person descriptions of what it is like to be depressed: "It is impossible to feel that things will ever be different [….] I feel like nothing is worth anything"; "the world holds no possibilities for me when I'm depressed; every avenue I consider exploring seems shut off" (Ratcliffe, 2015, Chapter 2, p.67). Similarly, those who have endured traumatic events sometimes describe a subsequent inability to experience or even contemplate meaningful future possibilities; it is as though the course of their lives has been prematurely cut short (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith, 2014). Even those of us who have not experienced anything like this can contemplate less pronounced experiential changes that occur during the course of our daily lives—those times when our surroundings seem strangely bereft of significance, somehow distant, or when none of our various projects draw us in and we feel disconnected or lacking in direction. The ability to experience and engage with things in meaningful ways that reflect backgrounds of values is thus susceptible to various subtly different and usually transient disturbances.

According to Sartre, there is a way in which we might also be said to *choose* the most fundamental projects and values that constitute who we are, thus also choosing—albeit indirectly—what matters to us and how. However, setting this bold claim aside, it remains plausible to maintain that certain projects, commitments, roles, pastimes, and associated values are partly constitutive of *who we are*, together comprising what Christine Korsgaard (1996) has termed our "practical identity". This can involve our identifying with various roles, such as being a teacher, parent, spouse, religious practitioner, politician, or police officer. Equally integral to this kind of identity, I suggest, are various ongoing projects and relationships to which we are committed: I am someone who, together with Person B, strives to achieve or become something.

So, the course of a life does not just involve engaging with possibilities in a generic way, doing what "one does" in various situations. In addition, we experience and engage with distinctive arrangements of meaningful possibilities that reflect and sustain who we are as unique individuals. The sense of "self" or "identity" in question is not fixed over time. Indeed, being who I am now can involve striving to become something that will change me

as a person considerably. Even so, in order to experience and engage with coherently organized networks of possibilities, some degree of stability and consistency is also required. Consequently, practical identity is precarious, fragile. The ability to be who we are depends, in various ways, on circumstances outside of our control—on life-events, our health, and changing relationships with other people. For example, those who suffer significant bereavements often talk of losing a part of themselves or no longer being quite the same person, given that so much of what they valued and what they did was dependent upon the deceased in one or another way (Ratcliffe, 2022). Similarly, something to be considered in considering the impacts of lockdowns is the resultant privation of possibilities, many of which were central to people's lives and even to their identities.

Lockdowns and Lost Possibilities

Of course, all sorts of circumstances and events can impact greatly upon our lives, including the repercussions of political decisions. However, there is little else that compares to the profundity and scale of loss associated with lockdowns. People were deprived of both (a) life-structures, consisting of projects, roles, pastimes, and habits, and (b) valued interpersonal relationships and interactions that would otherwise support their efforts to comprehend and navigate life-disruption. Now, experiences of lockdown were highly varied; there are no straightforward generalizations to be had concerning how *we* were all affected. But, for many of us, lockdowns did involve the loss of important possibilities. Think of life-events, such as being there for a grandchild's first birthday and first steps or being with a family member at the end of life. And consider that first term at university. During a recent conversation about the effects of social restrictions on university students, a neighbour of mine told me of how this had been the most important time of his life: so much happened; so many things changed; so many doors opened. It transformed his outlook on the world, shaping the course of his life in unforeseen ways. Then there are all those early-stage relationships that never progressed, all the projects that had to be cast aside, all the career paths and life-trajectories that were blocked. Most of us also had wider-ranging experiences of loss and absence, as we walked through deserted cities, passing empty schools, closed shops, and taped-up playgrounds. The surrounding world as a whole was permeated with a sense of what "I", "we", and "they" have lost—my empty office; our empty streets; their empty playground. Everything appeared strangely lacking, conspicuously bereft of the significant possibilities more usually attached to it.

Some losses can be couched in more concrete terms—losses of jobs, money, school days, hours of face-to-face university teaching, businesses, and so forth. However, simply enumerating these does not convey their potential significance in the course of a human life. Furthermore, there is so much that cannot be easily itemized —all of those idiosyncratic ways in which things matter in the context of particular people's lives. Nevertheless, what is common to a range of superficially different privations is their amounting to *losses of significant life-possibilities*. As such, they are not reducible to concrete, tangible, measurable, generalizable consequences of lockdown, making them difficult to single out and describe.

With colleagues based at universities in the UK and Japan, I conducted a qualitative survey of people's diverse experiences of social restrictions in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Froese et al., 2021). In addressing their experiences of loss, respondents identified a variety of specific activities and places, such as going to the cinema, the theatre, concerts, museums, pubs, and restaurants, travelling overseas, and seeing friends and relatives. Some also described these privations *as* losses of possibilities involving people, objects, situations, projects, and pastimes. Some such possibilities, they indicated, were irretrievably lost, rather merely transported—otherwise unaltered—to another point in one's life:

> As an older person the loss of time affects me most, and the possibility that opportunities may have been lost and it will not be possible to reinstate them.

> I have felt a sense of loss over missed opportunities, having planned to go on holiday and that not being possible. I have felt a small sense of loss of youth, as often people say your twenties is a time of great adventure, which has been taken from me and many others. And time is not something that can be given back.

> Loss of places where I have been happy that may close down for ever - local pub, cinema, restaurant, concert hall. Most - not being able to cuddle my cheery grandson when he gets tired and can't quite fall asleep, or read to my granddaughter. And grief for time passing as we get older without new experiences and time is running out.

What is it not to have "new experiences"? Clearly, time does not just stop altogether—events still unfold, and different things continue to be experienced. However, those life-experiences that matter to us, that stand out from others, usually involve our engaging with new and significant possibilities, which reflect what we take to be important

and may also affect us in ways that reshape our values. So, there is a difference between experiencing change *per se* and experiencing change that *matters*. Some survey respondents further stated that their losses of possibilities amounted to a lost "life" or "world". It is not that they merely experienced a loss of opportunities relative to an established and enduring life-structure. Instead, the very fabric of their lives, the framework of values relative to which things mattered, had been eroded:

> Terrible grief and mourning for my lost "life", for the people I probably will never see again because in this time, our lives have changed.
>
> I have felt loss and grief for my own life. I had been in a good place, emerging from a somewhat darker time in my life and I do feel like I have been pushed back down the hill again. I do feel a sense of loss for my more independent , more confident self.
>
> Loss of my world, my travel opportunities, my plans for the next years of retirement.[2]

Among those possibilities that can never be recovered are many that involve other people. Most of our lives are bound up in various ways with the lives of others. We experience, make sense of, and engage with the world in ways that are *ours*, rather than just *mine* and *yours* (Attig, 2011). Yet, in the UK alone, millions of people were denied the opportunity to visit and spend time with those they loved. For instance, many thousands of care home residents were isolated from spouses and other family members for months on end. Furthermore, many of these residents deteriorated rapidly or died during that period.[3] As we will now see, the privation of important life-possibilities is perhaps most evident when we turn to the testimonies of people who were bereaved during the pandemic and unable to be with those who died or spend time with others during the weeks and months that followed.

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[2] The testimonies quoted here were collected during the early stages of the pandemic, in Spring and Summer 2020 when social restrictions had only been in place for a few months at most. It is likely that the effects of longer-term restrictions on people's abilities to sustain a life-structure will have been even more pronounced and widespread.

[3] See, for example, the following news article, which describes an inability to "process" grief, involving a "freezing of the grieving process": https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2021-08-22/wife-with-dementia-no-longer-recognises-husband-after-pandemic-separation?fbclid=IwAR2l92WHKnwdMxDxmXs3W-Fb_Oya2SCbWomoAZq10qMHeNa92oClFJdv314 The UK-based Alzheimer's Society has drawn attention to the shocking deterioration undergone by many dementia sufferers during the pandemic, exacerbated by isolation, loneliness, and lack of familiar routines: https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/news/2020-07-30/lockdown-isolation-causes-shocking-levels-decline-people-dementia-who-are-rapidly#:~:text=Involving%20almost%202%2C000%20respondents%20affected,in%20people%20with%20dementia%27s%20symptoms.

Grief

In the UK alone, over 600,000 people die in an average year and millions of others grieve for them. Grief is not simply an enduring emotional reaction to the death of someone we love, but a multi-faceted process. How that process unfolds over time is not attributable solely to one's own internal mental states and processes. Rather, the course of grief is shaped and regulated in a variety of ways by our relations with other people and our engagement with a wider social world, both before and after a death (Ratcliffe, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social restrictions prevented many people from being with family members and close friends during the days, weeks, and sometimes even months before they died and from subsequently sharing their experiences of grief with others. For some, this has had a considerable impact on the course of grief over time. Losses of possibilities associated with the death of a person (involving possibilities that were "theirs", "mine", and "ours") were experienced against the backdrop of a wider-ranging loss.

To be cut off from someone shortly before and as they die, to be denied a proper funeral, to be prevented from participating in other established rituals, to be unable to grieve together—all of this can impede the ability to integrate bereavement into the ongoing structure of one's life. Consequently, there are numerous reports of a grief that is intense, enduring, and unchanging. Bereft of the dynamism of a social world, involving the shared pursuit and realization of new and meaningful possibilities, grief itself lacks movement.[4] People report struggling with the effects of various restrictions: being unable to see someone before they died or attend the funeral; being deprived of physical touch; being unable to share one's grief; being unable to make sense of what has happened *with* others; being unable to engage with other aspects of life in ways that might otherwise have mitigated the impact of bereavement. To varying degrees, they were deprived of a shared, social world, a context *within which* we more usually make sense of and adapt to bereavement.

A number of respondents to the survey quoted earlier experienced bereavements during the pandemic. Themes they mentioned include the difficulties of solitary grief, the lack of physical contact with others, a sense of unreality, being deprived of resources for processing grief, and a grief that is unchanging, somehow on hold:

[4] See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/relationships/need-grieve-mum-pandemic-has-taken-away/. For several other discussions of grief and lockdown, see: https://www.griefyork.com/covid-19.html

> Brother-in-law died suddenly and unexpectedly, not due to Covid, and it feels like grief was paused as it could not run the usual course of attending funeral etc. The sense of unreality still persists as have not been able to see family and be aware of the missing person.
>
> I lost a close friend (not due to Covid) and found it difficult to grieve on my own.
>
> I was fortunate to be able to attend but whilst at the funeral social distancing had to be observed, so even when I was by my family we were unable to console each other by hugging or touching. This lack of being able to console one another definitely made the grieving process harder.
>
> I feel unable to let go of the grief as I feel that I am putting it on hold while we wait for this situation to end and we are all, in a sense, fighting for survival.
>
> We had a Zoom funeral - it was pretty rubbish, and felt more like it was done because you are meant to have funerals than as a way to actually help process grief.
>
> It feels disconnected and unreal. I guess that it is related to the inability to be there and grieve as usual, with other people by my side.[5]

Another important consideration is how events associated with the end of life can ripple back and influence one's memories of a person, transforming the significance those memories have. How one remembers what happened back then is altered in light of what subsequently occurred and one's current situation (Goldie, 2012). Again, it is important to emphasize how we tend to think of a human-life as a cohesively organized process, involving development, transformation, achievement, and disappointment. The significance attaching to specific memories of a person is shaped by a larger sense of their life as a whole and the part one played in it. This can be affected profoundly by the circumstances in which a life, and a relationship, ended. For instance, one might look back on those joyous moments of being and feeling together, only to recall that the person died frightened and alone, that one's commitment never to be apart from them, never to leave them in times of adversity, was

[5] For a short account of how and why social restrictions affect the course of grief, see the following animated film: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08z34fv. For a detailed discussion of how grief is regulated by interpersonal and social relations, see Ratcliffe (2022).

irrevocably broken at the end. In this way, being deprived of interpersonal possibilities not only influences a sense of who we are now and where we are heading; it also affects and even transforms the significance of past accomplishments and past relationships. The point is not exclusive to events surrounding the end of life and extends to the significance of other important life-moments as well. Consider, for example, all those women who were required to give birth without the presence of a partner, other family member, or friend and how a traumatic birth-experience might influence one's perspective on the longer-term process of becoming a parent, shaping both the significance of remembered events and a sense of what the future holds.[6]

Evaluating Lockdowns

My aim here has not been to answer the general question of whether some or all lockdowns were ultimately justified in light of their consequences. Rather, my point has been that the costs of lockdowns have included something very important, but also difficult to make explicit and convey in its fullness: a widespread loss of life-possibilities, which has profoundly affected or will profoundly affect the course of many people's lives—who they are and who they will be. In considering the impacts of lockdown, this needs to be integrated into our evaluative perspective, even though it is not something that can be pinned down precisely. And I think that something has gone wrong in this regard. Ordinarily, our evaluations of significant events that impact upon ourselves, others, and society as a whole are informed and to some extent guided by emotional responses. Our emotional experiences of situations and events reflect an organized web of individual and shared values and concerns. Furthermore, they ordinarily do so in ways that are consistent with *who we are*. How things matter to us emotionally reflects an enduring network of interrelated values: moral, political, and religious values; projects and commitments that comprise our life-structure; important interpersonal relationships. Hence, a person's emotional responses tell us something about that person, about the unique configuration of values that partly constitutes who they are (Glas, 2017).

However, there are also occasions when emotional evaluations of situations and events become decoupled from our values. Various different scenarios of this general kind

[6] See, for example, the following newspaper article, which provides a detailed account of one woman's birth-experience during lockdown: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/not-a-single-soul-who-cared-forgotten-new-mothers-recall-trauma-of-giving-birth-in-pandemic-b1774500.html

might be discerned, involving conflicting values and/or conflicting emotions, but one that seems especially relevant to the current situation is what Thomas Szanto (2017) calls "emotional self-alienation". This involves responding emotionally to situations and events in ways that are not integrated into one's "overall evaluative outlook". Pre-established values lose their grip on us and our emotional experiences of unfolding events float free of them, in ways that diminish those experiences.[7]

Most of us do and should care deeply about preventing as many people as possible from dying due to a viral illness. Even so, judgements as to whether certain specific measures are appropriate should also take into account the consequences for everything else that we, as a society, value. Presumably, this includes seeking to ensure that we do not ultimately cause considerably more global deaths than we are likely to prevent. But there is also the cost to what we regard as of value *in* life, including what we take to be important or even essential for human flourishing. And that, I assume, includes being able to develop and sustain a practical identity. The unwavering confidence with which so many people have endorsed lockdowns and dismissed critical voices suggests an evaluative perspective that has drifted free of such concerns. To be more specific, I suggest that certain salient considerations and associated performances (including various forms of "social-distancing") have gripped our emotions in ways that do not take full account of pre-established values.

It is not implausible to suggest that this was an intended effect of UK Government strategy, given the extent to which the population has been continually subjected to monothematic messaging, epitomized by "stay at home; protect the NHS; save lives!" Now, one could respond that it was important to get the point across and that capturing people's emotions, in such a way as to motivate compliance, was entirely appropriate in such an unprecedented and dangerous situation. That said, virus-cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and the dangers posed by the virus have been presented day after day, month after month, in abstraction from any wider concern with illness and death. How many, we might ask, died of cancer and heart disease during the same period? How many of these and other deaths were, in principle, preventable too? How many lives could have been saved over the years by directing even a fraction of the resources at other problems? How many lives could be greatly enhanced and extended by increased efforts to reduce poverty and provide opportunities for

[7] Szanto (2017, pp.273-4) offers the examples of a pacifist who develops a passion for weapons that is at odds with a value system the person continues to endorse, and a flight attendant who brings home charming smiles that do not reflect an actual family situation.

the most disadvantaged? How many global deaths could have been prevented by doing everything possible to mitigate disruption of established global vaccination programmes during the pandemic—how many children will now die of measles, who would not otherwise have done so?

On top of all this are the losses of possibilities suffered by so many people—loss of the ability to sustain and become who we are, to pursue projects, to follow a particular path through life. In the face of this, uncritical advocacy of lockdowns has involved not only an obliviousness to established and cherished values, but evaluations that conflict with some such values. It became acceptable to condemn lonely people who sought the company of friends, to chastise someone who went out for more than one walk per day in order to relieve anxiety, to actively disapprove of children for being in a playground. Along with this came widespread acceptance of the need to deprive people of the right to be with a partner as they die (sometimes after many years of marriage with no prior experience of prolonged separation), to prevent many children from interacting with others their own age for months on end, and to insist that thousands of women give birth without the company and support of partners or others. Especially when combined with bright-siding among the privileging about the joys of baking sourdough bread and of finally listening to the birds singing, unqualified endorsement of lockdowns appears to involve an alienation from much that we, as a society, value in human life. Any balanced evaluation needs to recognize the extent to which lockdowns ran roughshod over certain, deeply engrained values, relative to which costs and benefits would more usually be discerned—the very basis for our evaluations. This requires full acknowledgement of what it is for people to be *denied possibilities*, to such an extent that life-structures become unsustainable. In the absence of that acknowledgement, the catalogue of what we lost in lockdown will include a loss of connection with our own societal values and perhaps the longer-term erosion of those values—of our sense of what is important in a human life and to be respected accordingly.

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