COVID, RISK-AVERSION AND JUDGEMENTS OF 'MORAL TASTE'

CHRISTOPHER COWLEY

Abstract: The Covid pandemic forced us all to make new decisions about risk. The threat was invisible, and few could know the exact infection risks in a particular place or to a particular person. With such ignorance, some of us erred on the side of greater, some on the side of lesser caution; and we made judgements about each other's decisions (and characters) accordingly. This paper explores the nature of these interpersonal judgements, which I call judgements of 'moral taste'. I investigate where they might lie on a spectrum running from purely subjective judgements (about aesthetic taste) at one end to purely objective judgements (about empirical facts) at the other. I remain neutral on where exactly moral judgements lie on the spectrum. The central claim is that judgements of moral taste lie 'between' judgements of aesthetic taste and moral judgements, with elements of both.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2022, when the worst of the latest Covid wave seemed to be over, I was planning to visit a friend in Nottingham, a four-hour train-trip away from my home. I had not seen her for almost three years. The night before our departure, my daughter was feeling unwell, and a Covid test reported positive. I texted my friend and said I would probably not be coming. The next morning, I took a Covid test myself but was negative. I therefore texted my friend and suggested I could still come on my own, that we could meet outside for a drink (it was a sunny spring day), well apart from each other, and that I would return straight home rather than stay the night as planned. I thought the proposal was uncontroversial, but my friend refused. She was worried not only for herself, but also her husband and daughter. "We can't afford to take any risks, we really don't want to stay home from work and school for a week. Your test was negative, but those take-home tests are not entirely reliable; and then there's long Covid, of course," she said.

Because of my own commitments I knew I would probably not be able to visit her again for another several months. I was annoyed. I thought she was being paranoid, although I didn't say anything to her. As a paid-up liberal I would not normally condemn her for her aversions and preferences, but here it was preventing a pleasant encounter after such a long period apart. (Perhaps she had been willing, and her husband was the paranoid one, in which case I would condemn her for failing to stand up to him!) Of course our encounter was not of huge moral importance, especially compared to the agonizing decisions faced by hospital and school directors at the time, but the encounter was not about *mere* pleasure, but about a longer-term friendship. Whatever the full story, I was saddened, and feared that I was fading from her life. Importantly, I also knew that she had no more epidemiological or virological expertise than I did, just as she almost certainly lacked details about the precise public health situation in Nottingham at that time or about her own or her family's precise physiological vulnerabilities. And finally, I thought, let's keep this in perspective: we're talking about some mild flu-like symptoms for a couple of days; long Covid's still pretty rare. As a regular driver, she never seemed too worried about the associated risks of death and injury on the roads, for example.

I was conscious of starting to sound like a Covid denier, which I was not. I was still disposed to trust the newspaper reports and to follow the government guidelines, even when vague or contradictory, but that spring the recent tone of both had been improving, and I felt rationally entitled to take risks that I might not have taken six months earlier.

However, after the initial irritation, I made the effort to imagine the situation from my friend's point of view. Our meeting was simply not necessary, and would generate no larger good. If there was

doubt, she erred on the side of caution, especially when it was not just about her, but about her work colleagues, her family members, and about her family members' own colleagues at work or school. She had been glad that her and her family's precautions had kept them all safe until now, and she clearly thought it was too soon to throw away that investment. And even if our friendship might suffer, there was surely ample time to renew it later, once the world came back to normal. In short, she must have concluded that, at the very least, I had not thought things through, at worst that I was being impulsive, reckless and selfish.

I suspect that this kind of conflict, or variations on it, became painfully familiar under all the uncertainties during the two long Covid years, both in the context of personal friendship as well as in the context of institutional policy. Will my Head of School say something about my not wearing a mask in my office? Will a student declare that it is still too dangerous to attend in person and therefore insist on her right to some hybrid teaching arrangement?

Covid might seem to be a distant memory by now, but there is every chance of something like it returning in the near future. And besides, this example raises more general questions about risk, risky behaviour, and judgements of risky behaviour that will be apply in many other contexts. Some people do extreme sports or join the army; some drive too fast or to slowly; some put lots of sun cream on, some put very little. And every parent faces such calculations and decisions and judgement of others every day with regard to the wellbeing of their progeny: the risks of crossing the road, talking to strangers, climbing trees, joining on-line chatrooms.

Different people will have different intuitions about allowable risks in my Covid scenario, but surely all of us have had encounters where we reached for the concepts of 'paranoid' or 'reckless' in describing the behaviour of someone else. This is what interests me. What do these adjectives mean, exactly? Sometimes, as in my Covid scenario, we will not *utter* the words 'paranoid' or 'reckless' but we will *think* them in, both during the disagreement and in later recall. Yes, I confidently thought my fiend was being paranoid (and I still think it), she confidently thought I was being reckless (and she probably still thinks it), and here's the thing: on that occasion neither of us was demonstrably incorrect in a way that would force one of us to retract our thought later. With the passage of time since then, no new information has come to light that would force either of us to admit that we had been mistaken. Was there a real risk? We shall never know.

What was perhaps new about Covid was both the sheer invisibility of the transmission and infection, and the sheer ignorance about the future impact of infection on individuals, in this case the impact on me, on my friend, and on the third parties that each of us would come into contact with. In comparison, most people understand the more contained risks of driving too fast – even if we are not experts on trauma wounds to the human body, we can extrapolate reliably enough from our own experience to imagine the particular kind of short and long-term damage and pain brought about by the high-speed encounter between flesh and steel. We understand why we should look both ways before crossing the road, but we don't really understand why we had to disinfect our hands quite so often in response to the ubiquitous but invisible Covid menace.

Let me now articulate two more precise philosophical questions in response the judgements that I and my friend were inclined to make about one another's putatively paranoid or reckless behaviour. The first is about the degree to which I can *understand* the other's risk-aversion (or lack of it) prior to and indeed within my judgement of her behaviour. The second is about the 'location' of such judgements and disagreements on a spectrum running from purely subjective judgments of aesthetic taste to purely objective judgements of empirical fact. Somewhere between the two extremes lie moral judgements. Although I cannot offer more than a sketch for future work, my main claim will be that such risk-aversion judgements are part of a class involving what I will call 'judgements of moral taste'. The name reflects the location of

such judgements 'between' judgements of aesthetic taste and judgements of morality, and they share characteristics of both.

Understanding

The classic philosophical approach to the problem of interpersonal understanding has to do with my trying to make sense of your actions by learning or imagining your relevant beliefs and desires. A simple example: I watch you reach for a fig and put it into your mouth. I assume that you *believe* that the object is a fig, and that you *desire* it because it is a fig. I myself do not like figs, and have no desire for the figs on the table in front of us, but I know what it is like to desire a particular food object, just as I know where in my anatomy to place the desirable food object. In short, I can imagine myself 'in your shoes', putting that same fig in my own mouth if I had the relevant belief and desire. On another occasion, I might see an object on the floor that looks like a dog turd. To my horror, you pick the object up and move it toward your mouth. "What are you doing?" I cry. "It's a fig," you say. You show it to me for closer inspection, you offer it to me to sniff: I recognise it indeed as a fig. In so doing you correct my mistaken belief and thereby render your planned consumption intelligible. I was perplexed, but now I understand.

A more complex example. I am sitting in the passenger seat of a car that Bill is driving. Bill stops at a red light. I understand the rules of the road, and so I understand why he stopped. But already I am making an ancillary judgement (to myself) – why did he stop so abruptly? He is, after all, an experienced driver, and there was no obvious threat on the road. I'm a driver myself and I have a sense of appropriate deceleration. He notices the perplexity on my face and he explains: "sorry, I was actually involved in a car accident a couple of months ago, and so I'm a bit over-cautious with my reactions." So I understand him better now – understanding here is scalar. I can't say I *fully* understand him, since I don't know anything more about his accident, nor about the psychological impact of the accident on him, but at least his explanation reduces my perplexity. He also has enough self-awareness to notice and understand my perplexity and to explain his behaviour as 'over-cautious', thereby reinforcing the behavioural norms (about appropriate deceleration) we share. At the moment of braking abruptly, he did not consider it 'over-cautious'; in hindsight he appreciates why I might think it was, and he offers me the very word, 'over-cautious', to redescribe his action.

These sorts of interactions are completely ordinary in all sorts of different contexts; it is perhaps surprising just how well 'tuned' we are to others' behaviour so as to reliably understand others most of the time, with most initial perplexity reduced by a quick follow-up question and explanation. Importantly, however, sometimes the follow-up explanations are not forthcoming, and if they are, sometimes they are not satisfactory. A week after riding with Bill, I ride with his twin sister Phil, who also brakes hard. Again she reads my thoughts, but declares: "I braked hard because that was the right thing to do," thereby making clear she's not going to argue about it. I think Phil is over-cautious, but I turn away; I accept the defiance. After all, I don't need to understand, it's not costing me anything. And it's her car, she can brake as hard as she likes. This turning-away is also ordinary and familiar, especially between strangers.

Let's return to my Nottingham friend, and our mutual perplexity. Although I consider her 'over-cautious' ('paranoid'), she considers herself merely 'cautious'. And unlike Bill the abrupt driver, my friend does not change her mind later, she does not apologise, she does not use the word 'over-cautious'. No: in her eyes she remains 'cautious'. But I too consider myself appropriately 'cautious', I would not use her word 'reckless'. When I encounter my friend's resistance to the proposed meeting, I take this as a cue to re-evaluate my proposal, since as part of our friendship I take her judgements seriously, but even after such re-evaluation I still do not believe the proposal was reckless.

In some circumstances, one can imagine that this kind of disagreement might be enough to end the friendship, if there had been serious consequences. Or the present disagreement might have comprised the last straw in a string of judgements about the other's putative paranoia or recklessness. In our case, it wasn't serious, we resumed our written and telephonic communication, and things did indeed go back to normal when Covid petered out. We had both turned away from the disagreement, and we did not mention it again. After all, my friend and I agree on so many more behavioural norms than we disagree on, especially given our shared background of class, ethnicity, culture, as well as our shared personal interests. Indeed, it is precisely against that backdrop of these shared norms that our Covid disagreement struck us as so surprising and unsettling.

Let's now look at my reluctance to accuse her of over-cautiousness or paranoia explicitly. I *thought* she was paranoid, and I *still think* to this day that she was paranoid, but I never accused her of it then, or later. Why not? Of course, it was not that serious, and it was not worth a possibly unpleasant confrontation. But also, part of the problem is that there might well not have been anything further for me to say to support the accusation, especially when we both lacked relevant expertise and relevant knowledge about the public health situation in Nottingham that day, expertise that could ground the authority necessary to resolve a disagreement to the satisfaction of both. It was simply the way I saw things. Similarly, I could not imagine that there was anything further *she* could say in response to the accusation, except "I don't agree." I might *speculate* about certain events that would have made her paranoid – maybe an elderly relative had died from Covid – but unless and until she offers that explanation (and with it the acceptance that her behaviour was in fact paranoid), we lack the basic grounds for meaningful and mutually revealing conversation on that topic. And she might speculate about my own biography in an attempt to explain my surprising recklessness – maybe she thinks me sheltered, inexperienced or unimaginative.

There is a question about the scope of the adjectives 'paranoid' and 'reckless' – was I calling *her refusal* paranoid or was I calling *her* paranoid? If the latter, was it a matter of her refusal being *so* paranoid that it could only have been issued by a paranoid person (i.e. going directly to the character trait)? It would be a pretty big leap to condemn the sinner on the basis of one sin, unless this paranoid refusal coheres with past occasions where I reached for the word 'paranoid', to the point where I merely confirmed what I already knew about her. However, we have to remember that we are *friends*, and that means that we have both cultivated a certain amount of good will toward each other, and this should manifest itself in a ready willingness to give the benefit of the doubt and resist leaps to character judgements. In other words, when understanding fails, we can choose to overlook the incident and accept the otherness of the other. If our friendship has any depth and richness, then there will be plenty of parts that are more or less opaque, and this will not threaten the many beliefs and attitudes that we have in common. I could also accommodate her putative character-based over-cautiousness as a simple fact about her, to be factored into my preparations for future interactions. Perhaps we might even reach a point where we not only agree on the *fact* that we disagree about appropriate caution in Covid scenarios (and elsewhere), but we can also make fun of it – while at the same time remaining fixed in our judgements of the other. "You would say that, you wild, reckless boy," she would say to me.

Subjective and Objective Judgements

So, both I and my friend have made judgement about the excessive or inadequate caution in the other's conduct: I judge that she has been over-cautious, she judges that I have been under-cautious. What exactly is the *status* of these judgements of caution? This is the main focus of the paper.

Imagine a spectrum running from 'subjective' judgements of aesthetic taste to 'objective' judgements about empirical facts. Objective judgements are relatively clear: you claim there are 312 seats in the lecture theatre next door; I claim there are 311. Assuming we both agree on the definition of 'seat' and are both talking about the same lecture theatre, then at least one of us must be mistaken, and we both accept that. And in most cases, we can also accept a reliable way for both of us to verify our different claims, i.e. we both go to the theatre and start counting. Our beliefs are answerable to the facts. (As a point of terminology, let me call a disagreement comprising two incompatible objective judgements an 'objective disagreement'.) In the context of Covid, there were plenty of objective disagreements, some of which could be resolved by agreed verification processes, some of which could be resolved by appeal to expert authority.

A paradigm of a subjective judgement concerns aesthetic taste: what I like, what I prefer. I like Beyoncé, you like Britney. We cannot even call this a disagreement since we are not talking about the same thing, we are merely exchanging information: there is one fact, your preference for Britney; there is another fact, my preference for Beyoncé, and both facts are perfectly compatible. Importantly, you do not choose to like Britney, you discover that you like her. There is also a fact that many people like Britney; perhaps this is what inspired you to listen to her in the first place, but that fact alone cannot induce you to *like* her: in this sense there is no fact in the world to which you are answerable. (There is only a fact within you, which you can be honest or dishonest about.)

Maybe I think you have 'bad' taste, but such a judgement is no more than an expression of my taste. So that means I cannot blame you for liking Britney, you cannot choose to stop liking Britney , and I cannot persuade you to stop liking Britney. It does not even make sense to deploy reasons to that effect – although I might deploy instrumental reasons to get you to stop *listening* to Britney (because she's uncool in your peer group, or because it would be rude to the party's host).[1]

At first glance, a judgement about the other's caution would seem to be very close to the subjective. In the same way that there are settled facts about my liking Beyoncé and you liking Britney, there are settled facts about how much discomfort I and my Nottingham feel in response to the risky proposed meeting. On the subjective model, I and my Nottingham friend would not actually be disagreeing about the proposed meeting; we would merely be exchanging information about one another's tastes, and neither of us have the right to be annoyed or to blame the other. And in acknowledging that she and I probably have nothing further to say about our judgements of caution, that also seems to fit the model of judgement of taste.

However, risk-aversion is not quite as simple as musical taste, for four reasons. First, there is often more one can say about our risk-aversion (about the source of the risk, about the risk, and about my aversion), whereas there is nothing more I can say (other than points of detail) about my preference for Britney. True, in the case of the disagreement with my Nottingham friend there did not seem much more to say; but the risk-aversion judgement is more evidently about the world than the judgement of taste, and therefore it is to a greater degree answerable to descriptions about the world: it is possible to learn to take a risk seriously. Second, the potential health consequences of Covid are usually obviously more serious, both for the judge and for third parties, than the consequences of any music. Third, Covid risk-aversion judgements are more accessible to persuasion attempts from relevant scientific experts, in a way that musical taste is not accessible to persuasion attempts from musical theorists or historians.[2] The experts later declared that there was no longer any significant Covid threat, and therefore the public restrictions could be dropped – personally maintaining the restrictions beyond that point really would be objectively paranoid without

[1] There might be a case where I am entitled to make a *moral* judgement about you, based on the *content* of the music you prefer, e.g. if it comprises misogynistic and violent lyrics.

[2] The musical theorist can persuade me that Bach is objectively better than Britney, but such a theorist cannot reliably persuade me to *like* Bach more than Britney.

further facts about e.g. being particularly vulnerable. Fourth, judgements about the other's caution very easily tie in with judgements of moral character, in a way that judgements about musical taste are unlikely to do. True, in some cases, a person might identify closely with music, perhaps as a performer or as a teacher, and here judgements of aesthetic taste could lead to judgements of character. But for most of us, indulging our aesthetic tastes amount to little more than a hobby. When my friend judges my proposed meeting reckless, she will automatically worry about the degree to which that reckless proposal expresses my character. I suggest that the above four reasons move risk-aversion judgements toward greater objectivity along the spectrum; not all the way to objective judgements of empirical fact, but at least further away from pure subjective judgements of aesthetic taste.

I have not yet mentioned *moral* judgements because their status on my proposed spectrum is contentious. On the one hand, there seems to be a lot of persistent and intractable moral disagreement about, and this resembles persistent and intractable differences of aesthetic taste; (this would be the central argument of 'non-cognitivists'). On the other hand, if we focus too much on the moral disagreement, we risk neglecting three things: (i) the huge mass of moral *a*greement in our relationships and in our society, agreement that must be there for any relationship or society to hold together over the longer term; (ii) the broad consensus about basic pro-social behaviour in e.g. the content of explicit and implicit moral education in our schools, in parenting manuals, in children's stories;[3] (iii) the *experience* of morality, which is of objective moral norms to be followed or infringed. I don't want to get too distracted by the debate about the exact status of moral judgements. Suffice to say that they are between judgements of aesthetic taste and judgements of empirical fact, in my view closer to the latter, even if they invoke a different kind of objectivity than empirical facts.

JUDGMENTS OF 'MORAL TASTE'

Judgements about caution are part of a category which I will call judgements of 'moral taste'. Other members of the class of judgements of 'moral taste' include judgements about punctuality and perhaps some judgements about tidiness.

Consider punctuality. Once again, our initial thought might well be that these are matters of pure subjective taste. Some people *like* getting to the airport four hours in advance, so that there is lots of time to deal with any obstacles on the way, other people *prefer* to get there with no more than an hour to spare because they loath airports. All talk of 'liking' and 'preferring' is subjective. However, there will be limits. Anybody who expects airport buses to run *exactly* to schedule, or to rely on getting through airport security in 10 minutes is in for a shock. But within these limits we can say: different strokes for different folks. And again, in many cases of disagreement about punctuality, it might well seem that there is nothing further that either party can adduce in support of their judgement, just as there does not seem to be an obviously correct answer. If person A and person B have the misfortune of travelling together, all person A can do is *cajole* or *beg* Person B to abide by her (Person A's) preferences.

Another kind of disagreement about 'moral taste', I would claim, would be second-order disagreements about excuses. Consider two parties who actually agree on matters of punctuality, but they disagree on the quality or strength of the excuses which the late party persistently offers. "My alarm didn't go off." Assuming it was true, is that a good excuse? Often this will depend on the context and the consequences.

[3] By 'pro-social' I'm thinking of simple and fundamental moral principles such as "promises should be kept" and "lying has to be justified".

If your alarm doesn't go off and we miss the plane because of that, I will become even more annoyed than I had been when I first heard the excuse.[4]

The latter point about consequences points to the reason for considering these judgements to be about 'moral taste' rather than simply about taste. So punctuality might be a matter of personal preference when it only concerns *me*. If nobody else is affected whether I get to the airport sooner or later, then there really does not seem to be any objective rightness or wrongness of the matter, and I can listen to Beyoncé on the way. Where it becomes *more* objective is when my preference affects others, as in the examples above, which are essentially about conflict. And when they are more about conflict, then there is a greater risk to the other's interests, and this is enough to make it *more* moral, and more objective, than a purely self-oriented punctuality judgement. Because there is still an element of taste, the judgement is therefore one of 'moral taste'. With pure judgements of taste, the fact that you like Beyoncé is not a reason for me to like Beyoncé. It is perhaps a reason for me to *try* Beyoncé, if I have the time and curiosity, or if I tend to like the things you like, but once I start listening, there is nobody in the situation except me and Beyoncé.

In contrast, if you and I are planning to get to the airport, and I want to get there four hours early, this might bother you because you hate airports. This *is* a reason for me to re-evaluate my moral taste preferences. Similarly, if we leave later, and I get nervous imagining all the ways our trip to the airport could be delayed, this will be a reason for you to re-evaluate your moral taste judgements. Perhaps neither of us will change our mind; all I am claiming is that there is this extra reason for re-evaluation, and that my decisions might have harmful consequences for you, and all this comes from the outside – that's enough to make these other-involving judgements of moral taste more objective than judgements of pure taste.[5]

Another difference: risk and punctuality both involve counterfactuals. If I aim to arrive at the airport four hours early, and I succeed, I might reassure myself with the thought: "if I had delayed it, I might well have been caught in traffic." Similarly, if I avoid meeting friends whose daughters have tested Covid-positive, I might reassure myself with the thought: "if I had met him, I might well have caught Covid and had to self-isolate". In both cases, the counter-factuals will perhaps never be known. But at least thinking counterfactually represents a richer degree of engagement with the objective world that judgements of taste do not.

The objectivity of other-involving punctuality judgements increases when larger numbers of people are involved. Consider a lecturer who is used to starting her lectures within the "academic quarter-hour". This is not serious enough to be an objective disciplinary matter for the university, but it still affects the quality of the students' education, which the lecturer is being paid to look after. Here the persistently late lecturer is not only depriving the students of the extra lecturing time (time which the students have themselves invested in), but she is also failing to show full *respect* to the students as fellow and morally equal participants in the educational conversation. More abstractly, she is also failing to show full respect to the institution, not only as an employer, but also as a community of scholarship and learning to which she supposedly committed and recommitted herself. So again, in this case, there is more to 'anchor' the judgement of moral taste in the real world. She might be open to persuasion to start her lectures on time, but I

[4] Another judgement of 'moral taste' might be Kant's 'imperfect duties': one has a duty to give to charity, but one does not have a particular duty to give a particular amount to a particular charity. You and I might disagree about whether your charity 'deserves' the money more than my charity; or we might disagree about whether you are donating 'enough', given how much you earn.

[5] It might be argued that judgments of pure taste might also be other-involving, as when you and I are trying to decide what to listen to. Would this make them also more objective? No, because judgements of taste are based firmly in liking or not liking the music, which is an entirely subjective matter. Yes, I might do you a favour by agreeing to listen to your Britney, but that's not enough to make me like it.

cannot rationally fault her if she rejects such persuasive efforts – the academic quarter hour remains within the scope of discretion. We agree to disagree, and we teach our separate ways.

Now imagine I am colleagues with the persistently late lecturer. Her lateness does not affect me personally, but her attitude of disrespect (and my inability to understand it) *bother* me, because I consider it a sign of disrespect to the people and institutions whom I respect, and since we have the same job. This 'bothering' is a further reason to think of the judgement of moral taste as more objective. With judgements of taste, your preference for Beyoncé does not really bother me. I might find it incomprehensible, since I cannot hear what you hear in it. But it does not really bother me, partly because I know there is nothing you can do about it.

Importantly, your musical preferences do not imply anything about your character. In contrast, when my colleague is persistently late for her lectures, I judge that this shows disrespect for the students and for our university, and then I am inclined to make other character judgements: that the colleague cares more about her own scholarship than about students; that the colleague is not a team-player in the way that she should be; and therefore that the colleague is arrogant and selfish and uncollegial. I might not be able to afford to make such explicit judgements since I am 'stuck' in the same department as her; it might be necessary for our on-going co-operation into the foreseeable future if I ignore not only her punctuality decisions but also if I ignore my annoyance about both her decisions and about my inability to understand them.

Conclusion

I have been trying to define a class of judgements with the label of 'moral taste'. There has not been much discussion of that in the philosophical literature, but I think they merit further scrutiny. I tried to show that they lie 'between' judgements of taste and moral judgements, with elements of each. Some judgements of moral taste will be close to judgements of taste, others will be closer to moral judgements. My sense is that judgements of moral taste play a larger role in a person's identity (both the chosen and the unchosen components), in her *sense* of identity, and in her more or less integrated perspective on the world, than has yet been recognised.

Dr. Christopher Cowley is an Associate Professor in the School of Philosophy at University College Dublin. To contact Dr. Cowley, email christopher.cowley@ucd.ie.