

Public Health Emergencies

Marcel Verweij

Ethics Institute / Dept Philosophy

Utrecht University, NL



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Public health emergencies

- Thesis: in public health emergencies moral principles that are common in ‘normal’ circumstances may be overruled or set aside by other considerations.
- Discuss different possible explanations of thesis – different justifications for policies – different levels of crisis
- More questions than answers



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PANDEMIC

Influenza pandemic: example

- Global emergency, magnitude unknown
- Action plans to prepare and response (hence mitigate chaos)
- WHO background reports on ethical issues
 - Public health interventions
 - Health care professionals' duty to care
 - Distribution of scarce resources
 - International cooperation



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- Main conflicts between
 - but also sources of justification for policies:
- Respecting human rights; fairness and equity (deontological approach)
- Maximizing protection against influenza and effects on welfare (consequentialist approach)



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In emergencies: justified to bypass rights for the common good ?

- Many lives at stake, immediate action necessary
- *However:*
 - Protection of rights *is* a common good.
 - Public health measures: high stakes also in non-emergency settings
 - Consequentialist approach requires information about expected consequences; difficult in pandemic
 - No time to deliberate about rights ? → preparedness plans should avoid that



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Extraordinary measures may find justification in 'common' framework

E.g. principles for allocation of scarce resources

- Do most good (maximise protection) with limited resources
- Distribute protection in equitable way
- Install and follow fair procedures that enhance accountability



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Some extraordinary measures may be justified within 'common' framework

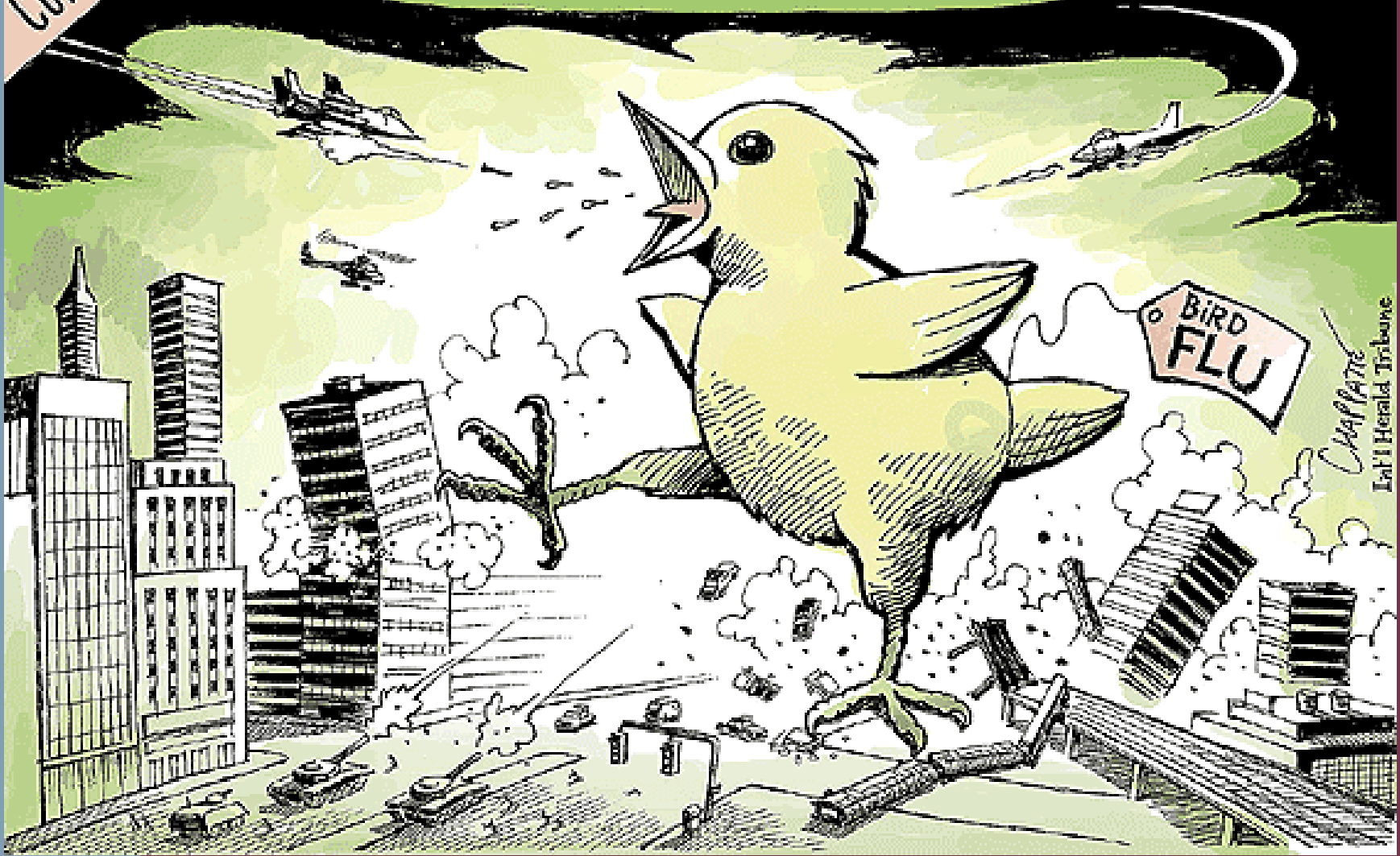
- Antiviral drugs and vaccination for life-saving pandemic responders first
- Vaccination: prioritising children (as spreaders) over persons for whom influenza is most dangerous (?)
- Medical care: withdrawing mechanical ventilation from patient A in order to start treating patient B who may recover faster



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COMING SOON

BIRDZILLA



Critique

- In real crises there may be no possibility for any form of reasonable priority setting
- ‘Fairness’, and ‘maximizing the good’ may be meaningless in complete chaos.



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Different levels of crisis ?

- ‘Normal circumstances’ of public health
- Crisis I, but still possible to find reasonable justification within basic moral framework
- Crisis II, where the possibility for having reasonably justified practices is at risk (e.g. some level of public order)
- Complete chaos



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Questions

- Is it possible to distinguish levels of crisis which may require different *ethical* responses and justifications?
- Do pandemic preparedness plans take such levels into account; and decisions about switching from one level to another?
- Is there still a place for morality in a complete crisis/chaos, or if such chaos is imminent?



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No answers - discussion?

- WHO Reports ethics & pandemic influenza
 - www.who.int/ethics
- Mail me:
 - M.F.Verweij@uu.nl



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