

Masking freedom and liberty

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To the Editor,

The anti-mask movement continues to grow as governments struggle to contain Covid-19 and attempt to keep the economy functioning. The rules imposed by governments to both contain the virus and keep the economy afloat is resulting in numerous mixed messages regarding personal safety measures throughout areas that are the hardest hit versus those less affected. People are confused, tired, losing patience and on edge just trying to keep up with the changing rules. This is a very trying time in our collective history. Combine a pandemic, with an economic depression, and the ongoing civil rights struggles with human fallibility and well? you all know what I'm talking about.

When people have to live with uncertainty for a long period it's a very unsettling feeling and causes quite a bit of anxiety and often people will gravitate to that which provides some direction and perceived certainty. The anti-mask movement appears to be the result of this uncertainty combined with anti-authority bias and misguided notions of freedom and liberty. It might help at this moment in time to revisit some of the ideas of the man who has been called the 'father of liberty,' John Stuart Mill. Many of his ideas helped form the thinking of liberal democracies throughout the world and perhaps it would help guide our behaviour through this challenging period.

While I have not spent endless hours trying to figure out what the anti-maskers are fighting for, it appears that they do believe that they are fighting for freedom and struggling against government and corporate tyranny. They seem to believe that the virus was created for the purposes of a large social experiment designed by governments and corporations to make us all compliant citizens or 'good Germans' to quote a phrase, all in the interests of creating a new world order. While I share in their beliefs regarding corporate tyranny, I do have some bad news for them: the new world order is already here. It was an experiment that began in the late 1970's and solidified sometime around the turn of the millennium and it's called neo-liberalism. It's a belief in the primacy of profit over people. Its hallmarks are freedom of the market, privatization, deregulation, anti-union and hyper-individualism. Essentially at its core is the belief that corporations should have the ability to do whatever they want regardless of the consequences. And when there are negative consequences such as mining companies poisoning drinking water, air pollution, excessive packaging in our landfill etc, the consequences of their actions fall to the greater society to absorb because for the company to take responsibility would negatively impact profit.

Mill speaks about freedom in his 1859 work *On Liberty*, Mill says, 'The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.' Yes, we can have freedom, but we have an obligation to our fellow citizens who have an equal right to their own version of freedom. When I hear an anti-masker say that they are refusing to wear a mask because they are fighting for our freedom, I wonder if they realize that they are in fact behaving just like the corporate forces they claim to be against. They want the freedom to not wear a mask, but in doing so they could be spreading a potentially deadly virus that could seriously impact their fellow citizen's ability to pursue their own good in their own way or even deprive them of their lives. That's not a self-regarding act, in the sense that the consequences will fall on the anti-masker only. It's a selfish act whose consequences fall onto their fellow citizens.

While many employees are being forced to sign declarations that if they do not follow Covid-19 safety protocols they could be disciplined or fired, anti-maskers are being allowed to still enter stores unmasked and many are aware that they only need to state that they have a medical condition that prevents them from wearing a mask and that nothing can be done. This behaviour undermines all those with legitimate medical conditions and puts everyone at risk.

I believe in the right of freedom of expression and action, but not total freedom as there has to be restrictions to both expression and action. And here we have the distinct difference between someone who may think and write about conspiracy theories, which Mill would say is acceptable, and someone who puts those beliefs into action in a way that could endanger their fellow citizens. When

those thoughts turn to actions and those actions, in the words of Lorne Giles Fox, "infringe on the rules necessary for the protection of the other members of society, and the consequences of that act fall on other men [sic], then he must be punished and his liberty restricted."

Freedom of expression is one of the most cherished rights that we have and we should be able to express ourselves in whatever way we want, but as Mill adds, we should only be able to do so, "within the limits imposed by the rights of others." You must, in a free society, be allowed, "without molestation, to carry your opinions into practice at your own cost," but when your actions can and do have a serious cost to others your actions are no longer self-regarding acts that only impact you, and thus Mill concludes, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." There are many ways to resist tyranny but endangering fellow citizens by not wearing a mask during a pandemic, in my opinion, is not one of them.

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