

# Philosophy of the Pandemic

Enno Fischer

WiSe 2022/23

E-mail: [enno.fischer@rub.de](mailto:enno.fischer@rub.de)

Office Hours: by appointment

Class Hours: Thursday 8:30 - 10:00

Class Room: GA 3/143

---

## Course Description and Goal

In this course we will look at the COVID-19 pandemic from a variety of philosophical perspectives, including philosophy of science, ethics, and political philosophy. We will address questions such as: What functions do scientific models of the pandemic fulfil? What is the role of scientific evidence in pandemic policy-making? Are lockdowns justified? Are citizens obliged to get vaccinated? How should scarce medical resources be allocated? Students will learn to apply and integrate a broad range of epistemological and ethical theories to engage with a topic of current relevance. Moreover, students will learn to independently research a controversial topic and to develop their own position in an argumentative way.

## Access to Course Material and Communication

PDFs will be provided via moodle as far as copyright restrictions permit. Please sign up for the course on moodle.

## Participation, 'Studienleistung', and Exam

Active **participation** is required from all who want to take part in the course. This includes presence at all sessions, thorough reading of the assigned literature, and active participation in exercises during class. Consistent participation is essential for your personal learning experience since the later sessions build on contents of the preceding sessions.

In order to pass the '**unbenotete Studienleistung**', you need to prepare a 15 minute power-point based presentation to be given in class (in English). You are expected to research one of the class topics independently and to incorporate material from at least 2-3 sources beyond the

assigned readings. These additional sources can be further philosophical texts on the topic of the session. But you are especially encouraged to make use of other kinds of sources such as scientific articles, newspaper articles, policy documents, blog posts, podcasts and other sources. During your presentation you are expected to explain your choice of sources. Your presentation time will be strictly limited to 15 minutes. In addition, you will have to prepare a 4–5-page summary (in English) of your presentation which must include references to the sources you have selected. The summary is to be submitted by Tuesday, 6pm the week before your presentation. For example, if you present on 1.12. you will need to submit your summary by 22.11., 6pm. Please be ready to sign up for the topics for the presentation during the second class on 27.10.

Graded exams (benotete Studienleistung) in this course will be essays ('Hausarbeit'). You will be asked to suggest a topic for your essay and to develop a sufficiently specific question to be addressed in the essay (20 pages). Essays will have to be written in English. As a starting point for developing a research question you can consult the course material. But you are expected to incorporate and discuss material that goes well beyond the course material. Please consult the essay guidelines for requirements on formatting etc. ([https://www.pe.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/mam/fsr/content/aktuelles/wissenschaftliches\\_arbeiten\\_im\\_philosophiestudium.pdf](https://www.pe.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/mam/fsr/content/aktuelles/wissenschaftliches_arbeiten_im_philosophiestudium.pdf))

#### Deadlines:

- 13.12.2022, 6pm: sign up for the essay. Please submit:
  - a preliminary title,
  - a sufficiently specified research question,
  - a structure for the essay with informative section titles,
  - and preliminary references.
- 31.03.2023: submit the essay.

## Covid

The up-to-date rules for seminars that take place in person can be found here: <https://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/en/current-information-about-corona>.

## Course Plan

This is a preliminary course plan. For each session the plan lists the core readings. Additional material selected by the students will be added as the semester proceeds.

### 20.10.2022 Introduction

**27.10.2022 Models I** In this session we will look at a variety of epidemiological models and their evaluation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as lockdowns. We will look at the assumptions and idealizations that such models make, and we will relate our observations to discussions about scientific models in contemporary philosophy of science.

- Ferguson et al. 2020: Report 9: Impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to reduce COVID-19 mortality and healthcare demand.
- Frigg 2020: Models in Science. Sec 1 and 3.

**03.11.2022 Models II** In this session we will discuss the use of models to inform policy making. What are limitations of epidemiological models in this context? What value assumptions feature in the development and interpretation of epidemiological models?

- Harvard and Winsberg 2021: Causal Inference, Moral Intuition, and Modeling in a Pandemic.

### 10.11.2022 No class

**17.11.2022 Causation I** Causal claims have played an important role in shaping our understanding of the pandemic threat and the evaluation of counter measures. Looking at different ways to quantify COVID-19 deaths we will see that there is not a unified approach to the concept of cause, but that there are multiple approaches that may serve a variety of goals.

- Schroeder 2020: How Many Have Died?
- Amoretti and Lalumera 2019: COVID 19 as the underlying cause of death.

**24.11.2022 Causation II** Continuing our discussion of causal claims in the pandemic we will have a closer look at a theory of causation that recently has been very popular among philosophers of science: the interventionist account of causation. This account promises to spell out causal claims in a way that is particularly useful from a pragmatic perspective. But how useful is Woodward's concept of intervention in a pandemic context?

- Woodward 2003. *Making Things Happen*. Chapter Chapter 2, pp. 25-28; Chapter 3, Sections 3.1.1-3.1.4 (pp. 94-102; and figures on pp. 103-4).

**01.12.2022 Lockdown Justification I** Lockdowns were imposed in many countries in response to the spread of Covid. Was imposing lockdowns justified? In this session we will look specifically at the epistemic aspects of lockdown justification: what kind of knowledge do policy makers need to have in order to justifiably restrict citizens' liberties? The reading for this class is critical of lockdown measures.

- Winsberg et al. 2020: How Government Leaders Violated Their Epistemic Duties.

**08.12.2022 Lockdown Justification II** Following up on our discussion about justification of lockdowns we will look at a position that defends lockdowns and addresses the conditions under which lockdown measures are permissible.

- White et al. 2022: When Is Lockdown Justified?

**15.12.2022 Trust in Science I** Policy making in a pandemic should be guided by scientific evidence. But the success of instituting measures against the pandemic crucially depends on citizens' uptake of policy decisions. In this context an important factor is how scientific results are communicated and whether citizens have trust in science. Looking at the example of vaccine hesitancy we will discuss a variety of concepts of trust in science.

- De Melo Martin 2022: Review of *Vaccine Hesitancy* by Maya Goldenberg.
- Goldenberg 2021: *Vaccine Hesitancy*, Chapter 5.

**22.12.2022 Trust in Science II** In this session we will continue the discussion of trust in science with a particular focus on distinguishing between stakeholders and various forms of trust in science.

- Magnusson 2022: Experts, Democracy, and Covid-19.

**12.01.2023 6pm, GA 3/143 Precautionary Reasoning and Pandemic Restrictions** Lecture by Lucie White (Utrecht University)

**19.01.2023 Mandatory and Compulsory Vaccination** Should vaccination against Covid be mandatory or even compulsory? In this session we will look at a number of arguments in favor and against a duty of receiving vaccination.

- Giubilini 2020: Vaccination Ethics.
- Giubilini 2020: An Argument for Compulsory Vaccination: The Taxation Analogy.

**26.01.2023 Allocating Scarce Medical Resources I** The pandemic has imposed exceptional strain on health-care systems. In this session we will look at medical triage protocols and then discuss ethical principles that guide the distribution of scarce resources.

- WHO 2020: Ethics and COVID-19: resource allocation and priority-setting.
- Savulescu et al. 2020: Utilitarianism and the pandemic.

**02.02.2023 Allocating Scarce Medical Resources II, Concluding Discussion** In this session we will follow up on discussions about allocating scarce resources. Among other things we will address questions about inequalities in resource allocation. Moreover, we shall address whether it may affect a person's access to medical treatment of COVID if that person declines to be vaccinated against COVID.

- Bruce and Tallman 2021: Promoting racial equity in COVID-19 resource allocation.
- Robertson 2022: What the harm principle says about vaccination and healthcare rationing.