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Comment by John Berteaux

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Prof. John Berteaux, a philosopher from the School of Humanities and Communication at California State University Monterey Bay and a new member of the Board of the ISCSC, has given wonderful presentations over the years at the annual meetings of the organization.

Below he presents a view of the quality and actual community-based meaning of freedom in an age of Covid-19:

In discussions of how the state should react to the current pandemic, one controversial issue has involved whether it should force citizens to wear masks when in public. As a matter of fact, from New Orleans, Louisiana to Turlock, California, and from Aurora, Colorado to San Antonio, Texas, individuals asked to put on a mask have occasionally turned violent.

In a recent New York Times article, Economist Paul Krugman suggests “a cult of selfishness is killing America.”

On the one hand, many argue that laws requiring citizens to wear masks infringe on their freedom, their self-determination. Indeed, liberalism is characterized as “an attitude toward life and life’s problems that values freedom, for individuals, minorities, and nations.” Yet, given the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic, others insist everyone should be forced to wear a mask in public spaces.

In fact, philosophers Charles Taylor, Alison Jagger, and Michael Sandel suggest we often misconstrue our capacity for self-determination and neglect the social preconditions under which that capacity can be meaningfully exercised.

They remind us that freedom or self-determination is not abstract. It is a social and political construct.

Our self-determination is expressed from within a community, and that requires we seek a balance between it and our shared social responsibility. Destroy the community and we destroy a vital precondition for the expression of our freedom.