



Research Article

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The Twin Crises of Covid-19 and Racism: Pragmatic Mastery, Theory, Religion, and Ethics

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Abstract: In 2020, two crises emerged into prominence in the United States and other parts of the world: (1) the flourishing of the COVID-19 virus, in which the polarization and relativization of knowledge have hobbled efforts to prevent pandemic spread, and (2) the killing of George Floyd which has stirred worldwide protests against centuries of racial oppression and unbared an underlying racist ideology about the seemingly lesser value of Black people. It might seem that both these crises are unrelated, but this article argues that both crises are rooted in a common phenomenon, the surge of the pursuit of everyday pragmatic mastery beyond its legitimate boundary. This pursuit of mastery has instrumentalized structures of discourse, thereby undermining Alfred Schutz's paradigm of the well-informed citizen seeking to understand dispassionately imposed relevances and the non-pragmatic provinces of meaning that might have restrained the pursuit of such mastery, such as the provinces of theoretical science and religious experience. As regards racism, the pursuance of such mastery results in transgressing and eliminating through violence the ethical boundaries the Levinasian other prescribes. These twin crises are not disparate happenings occurring now to remedy the tedium of the pandemic, but are bound together at the hip.

Keywords: pragmatic mastery, white supremacy, well-informed citizen, religious province of meaning, theoretical province of meaning, Schutz, Levinas, relevances, ableism

In 2020, two crises have emerged into prominence in the United States and in other parts of the world: (1) the flourishing of the COVID-19 virus in which the polarization and relativization of knowledge have hobbled efforts to prevent pandemic spread, and (2) the killing of George Floyd which has evoked repeated and worldwide protests against centuries of racial oppression and unbared an underlying racist ideology about the seeming lesser value of Black people. It might seem as if both these crises are separate and unrelated, but this article will argue that both crises are rooted in a common phenomenon, the surge of the pursuit of everyday pragmatic mastery beyond its legitimate boundary. Unbounded pragmatic mastery undermines Alfred Schutz's paradigm of the well-informed citizen and the non-pragmatic provinces of meaning that might have restrained it, such as the provinces of theoretical science and religious experience. In the case of racism, the hunger for such mastery leads to transgressing and eliminating through violence the ethical boundaries that the Levinasian Other, in particular the African-American, prescribes. Further, the racist suppositions appearing in George Floyd's killing can be shown to have been repeatedly allied with forms of ableism, particularly in the cruelty visited on Black persons with disabilities. These suppositions, thereby, point to a desperate attempt to be free from (by obliterating from sight) any restraints on pragmatic mastery, even disabilities. In this article, these crises are not disparate happenings occurring at

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this particular time as a result of the tedium of the pandemic. Rather, they are bound together at the hip. It is, then, no coincidence, then, that racist symbolism (e.g., Confederate imagery) has appeared front and center in rallies (e.g., in the armed protest at the Michigan capitol) protesting against any measures that might limit the freedom of protestors to exercise mastery in their everyday lives – even if those measures might protect others (and even themselves) against the virus.

1 The crisis of the COVID-19 virus

1.1 The well-informed citizen

Alfred Schutz's "The Well-Informed Citizen" presents a framework for understanding the current Covid-19 crisis. Schutz begins emphasizing realms of unknowing that surround both scientific inquiry and pragmatic everyday life, in which we pursue pragmatic goals without needing or wanting to inquire, for instance, how complicated objects like cell phones work. Schutz constructs three types: the expert, the man [sic!] -in-the-street, and the well-informed citizen. The first, the expert, possesses knowledge restricted to a limited field, in which he or she possesses clear and distinct opinions based on warranted assertions.

The second, the man-in-the-street, grasps recipes for bringing forth in typical situations typical results by typical means, and such knowledge is sufficiently precise for practical purposes at hand, which, when systematically realized, make possible his pursuit of happiness. The man-in-the-street lives naively in his and his in-group's interests, but these "intrinsic relevances" face challenges when he or his group encounter "imposed relevances." Schutz writes:

We are, however, not only centers of spontaneity, gearing into the world and creating changes within it, but also the mere passive recipients of events beyond our control which occur without our interference. Imposed upon us as relevant are situations and events which are not connected with interests chosen by us, which do not originate in acts of our discretion, and which we have to take just as they are, without any power to modify them by our spontaneous activities except by transforming the relevances thus imposed into intrinsic relevances. While that remains unachieved, we do not consider the imposed relevances as being connected with our spontaneously chosen goals. Because they are imposed upon us they remain unclarified and rather incomprehensible.¹

The man-in-the-street takes such imposed relevances as elements of the situation to be defined or conditions for his course of action, without seeking to understand their origin and structure. This is so because he is governed by sentiment rather than information and prefers "the comic pages of newspapers to the foreign news, the radio quizzes to news commentators."²

Somewhere on a continuum between the expert and the man-on-the-street, one finds the third type, the well-informed citizen, who does not strive to be an expert, but resists acquiescing in vague recipe knowledge and searches instead for reasonably founded opinions in fields of mediate concern which do not bear directly upon her purposes at hand. The well-informed citizen endeavors to gather knowledge about the origin and sources of relevances imposed upon her and restricts the zone of the irrelevant as minimally as possible since, from such a zone, "anonymous powers," such as unknown enemies amassing a well-concealed nuclear arsenal, can emerge and overtake her.³ Finally, the well-informed citizen looks for information by consulting eyewitnesses, insiders (whose relevances differ from her own especially insofar as insiders have access to a context she lacks), analysts who structure information according to relevances like her own, and commentators who group information in line with relevances "considerably different from" her own. Given the importance of our social "in-groups" and in accord with our tendency to trust

¹ Schutz, "The Well-Informed Citizen," 127.

² *Ibid.*, 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 131.

those whose relevances converge with our own, Schutz acknowledges that knowledge that is “socially approved” by one’s in-group is more readily embraced and held. As a result, he also bemoans how methods of public opinion polling often end up conferring social approval upon the views of the uninformed man-in-the-street, who usually represents majority opinion, at the expense of informed opinion, thereby imposing such views “upon the better-informed members of the community.”⁴ Favoring such uninformed, majoritarian opinions reflects a mistaken understanding of what concepts like “democracy” and “majority rule” mean.

1.2 The applicability of “the well-informed citizen”

The spread of the corona virus constitutes an imposed relevance with which one must come to terms “by transforming the relevances thus imposed into intrinsic relevances,”⁵ as might occur, for instance, if a large cache of nuclear arms were discovered in a neighboring country, compelling a nation to undertake actions to protect its reigning system of intrinsic relevances. Such transformation occurs in varied ways with regard to the pandemic. For those who conceive the virus as highly contagious and lethal, it threatens their other relevance systems, such as the protection of loved ones or continued pursuit of career goals. Consequently, they come to terms with this imposed relevance by wearing masks, practicing safe-distancing and careful hand-washing, and home sheltering – all of which entail adopting new sets of relevances (e.g., purchasing masks, learning to use zoom technology).⁶ Others’ highest relevances might consist in pursuing life as usual, working and socializing as usual, and so they might resist protective measures (mask-wearing, social distancing) since pursuing life-as-usual ranks as more relevant for them than avoiding the virus, whose chance of infecting and killing them they might think not to be very likely. This interpretation of contracting the virus as “less likely” indicates that in accord with their ranking of relevances they are prone to interpret (through what Schutz calls systems of “typifications”) the pandemic as “less threatening,” thinking that it is statistically “less probable” that they will be infected; that they will be able to survive any infection without much suffering; or that the corona virus is no more dangerous or contagious than seasonal influenza.

However, some of these latter beliefs clearly contradict the best available scientific information provided by experts. For example, according to a study deriving from Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Emory University School of Medicine, based on the Center for Disease Control’s statistics, and reported on by Rachel Lutz on May 28, 2020, “statistics on counted deaths suggest that the number of COVID-19 deaths for the week ending April 21, 2020, was 9.5-fold to 44.1-fold greater than the peak week of counted influenza deaths during the past 7 influenza seasons in the US, with a 20.5-fold mean increase.”⁷ Similarly, those minimizing the virus’s threat have produced outright false claims, such as that hydroxychloroquine can prevent or cure those with Covid-19.⁸

Nevertheless, one could argue that Schutz’s account of the well-informed citizen might seem a bit outdated, perhaps because too dependent on print media, when arguing that the “man-in-the-street” reads only the comic pages and is indifferent to understanding the structure or origins of imposed relevances or potential imposed relevances. Nowadays, those who, like the man-in-the-street, exhibit little esteem for expert opinions are not indifferent to experts, but rather they assertively challenge them with reasons and arguments articulated and socially approved in their in-groups. Those both favoring and not favoring

⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁶ In such a case, motivational relevances, such as the desire to preserve our lives or work, make us turn to a set of concepts by which we interpret the things and events of our work, and these concepts become relevant to us on their own, as interpretive relevances. See Schutz, “Reflections on the Problem of Relevance,” 107–30.

⁷ Faust and del Rio, “Assessment of Death from COVID-19 and from Seasonal Influenza,” 1045.

⁸ The RECOVERY Collaborative Group (Horby, Mathem, et al.), “Effect of Hydroxychloroquine on Hospitalized Patients with Covid-19,” 2030.

protective measures against the virus consult social media and cable channels in which analyses are provided, at times from experts, from which their fellow in-group members draw. Given the polarized nature of such media, television, and political discourse, it would be less likely now to find widespread examples of well-informed citizens who form their own viewpoint by consulting commentators whose relevances are “considerably different” from their own.⁹

There are indeed limits to expert knowledge, whose systems are often separated from each other by abysses and not necessarily integrated with each other, and scientists themselves do not fully understand the lifeworld they start from. Some experts assume that their discipline is the only relevant one, while others defer to experts in other fields, as must take place in a pandemic where interdisciplinary cooperation is essential (e.g., public health and economics). Finally, those making final decisions must do so from beyond the narrowed field of experts, since such decision-makers alone can determine the ends to be realized as opposed to experts who focus more narrowly on the means to ends. Hence, Clemenceau’s comment that war was too important a business to be left exclusively to generals.

But it is one thing to indicate the limits of experts’ knowledge and another to attempt to disqualify their inputs. Such an endeavor to discredit an expert recently occurred when political functionaries argued that Dr. Anthony Fauci, supervisor of the US pandemic response, has made many mistakes, stating early in the pandemic that masks were unnecessary and then changing his mind when new data surfaced, such as the recognition that one could communicate the disease if one did not have symptoms or that cloth or home-made masks were almost as effective as N-95 masks in impeding virus spread. There are those¹⁰ who defend Fauci, claiming that his claims were adequately based insofar as they were founded on the evidence he had available at the time when the virus had first appeared and was not fully understood. If that is so – and to be sure of this, one would have to compare his claims with the evidence he had at hand – then it would not be a matter of a “mistake,” but rather a question of fallibly claiming something in accord with the evidence at hand and revising it later when more evidence called for revision.¹¹ In such a case, Fauci would have been following standard scientific practice, and it would afford no grounds for rejecting his expert recommendations or impugning his expert status. Fauci has even received numerous death threats – the ultimate attempt to dismiss an expert. This kind of ferocity against experts no doubt results both from the polarization of in-groups that, according to their different relevances, develop and disseminate via social media and cable television socially approved beliefs and defenses and from the invasiveness and austerity of the restrictions recommended in response to the pandemic. Schutz’s man-in-the-street exhibits no such animosity toward experts and appears only indifferent to their findings and willing to rely on his unclarified views as long as they sustain his pursuit of happiness. The fury, though, can even lead to deny any relevance of expertise at all or to dispute even the existence of expertise. Such an approach would undermine Schutz’s essay insofar as the rejection of expertise *in toto* would elevate all men-in-the-street to experts, dismantle any difference between experts and non-experts, and leave no one for well-informed citizens to consult. A similar strategy appears in classifying any opinions opposed to one’s own as “fake news,” thereby relativizing all news reports to one’s own in-group and its relevance and thus eliminating the possibility of any accurate or objective reports at all.¹²

Schutz correctly observes, “It is our interest at hand that motivates all our thinking, projecting, acting, and therewith establishes the problems to be solved by our thought and the goals to be attained by our actions.”¹³ But to understand better the conflicts and fissures that the corona pandemic introduces within

⁹ Schutz, “The Well-Informed Citizen,” 132.

¹⁰ Sanger-Katz, “On the Pandemic, Americans Still Trust the Experts.”

¹¹ Schutz warns against the hysteron-proteron that can occur in economic theory when one criticizes the validity of an economist’s conclusion that was validly based on the evidence at hand because that first economist did not take into account evidence available only much later to the critic – evidence that the first economist could not have had. See: Schutz, “Political Economy: Human Conduct in Social Life,” 98.

¹² Another strategy involves claiming that “the mere existence of a believable opposing claim was sufficient to rebut a balanced assessment of the totality.” See: Weiner, “The Towering Lies of President Trump.”

¹³ Schutz, “The Well-Informed Citizen,” 124.

Schutz's typology in "The Well-Informed Citizen," one needs to supplement that essay with his theory of the relationship between everyday pragmatic reality and multiple realities, in particular the theoretical province of meaning.

1.3 Everyday life/multiple realities

In the first half of "On Multiple Realities," Schutz depicts the paramount reality of pragmatic everyday life – of which non-pragmatic provinces of meaning, such as scientific theory (so important for experts) and religious experience, are modifications. In everyday life, we are governed by the pragmatic motive that impels us to "dominate"¹⁴ that world through working, i.e., "action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs by bodily movements."¹⁵ A deep genetic stratum within this everyday life effort to "master"¹⁶ this world is an actor's sense that "I can do it again."¹⁷ Immediately after introducing this Husserlian concept into his own analysis Schutz discusses "locomotion,"¹⁸ by which one can exchange one's *hic* for an *illic*, bringing within one's reach what had been distant. From a genetic standpoint, one can envision infants, who are already struggling to acquire a vast repertoire of behaviors to navigate the physical, perceptual, socio-cultural world they were born into, discovering a powerful sense of "I can" simply by crawling from one location to another. Shaun Gallagher's recent work on "enactivism" stresses the importance of such motor intentionality¹⁹ and traces moral abstract conceptual processes back to genetic origins in basic bodily movements.²⁰ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone concurs, affirming that the "I can" emerges from the "I move"²¹ and that "movement is the mother of all cognition."²² Even the gradually learned capacity to subsume unfamiliar experiences under the systems of the concepts, typifications, and routinized patterns in one's stock of knowledge exemplifies the "I can." By progressively typifying the world, subsuming what is unfamiliar under typifications, an actor realizes Weberian "rationalization" and the "disenchantment of the world."²³ Progressive typification links with the everyday pursuit of control insofar as it achieves "the transformation of an uncontrollable and unintelligible world into an organization which we can understand and therefore master."²⁴

Thus, in discovering something atypical, one encounters an imposed relevance, with which one must come to terms, usually by subsuming it somehow within one's stock of knowledge and making it typical. For instance, Schutz deploys the example of unexpectedly finding what looks like a coiled rope or a coiled snake in a corner of one's room as the experience of an imposed topical relevance. In such a case, one is compelled to discontinue present activity, attend to what is given, and determine under which typification what is given ought to fall since if it is a snake, it could cost one's life. The appearance of the virus constitutes a similar imposed topical relevance, which people seek to come to terms with by typifying it as "more lethal and contagious" than standard influenza and in need of major behavioral adjustments or as "just like the regular influenza" and not requiring many special adaptations.

There are then ascending levels of mastery from locomotion to typifications to higher-level typifications – by all of which one or one's group ensures that their ranked relevances are fulfilled and protected. Hence, to use the example from "The Well-Informed Citizen," should groups with destructive nuclear

¹⁴ Schutz, "On Multiple Realities," 209.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 224–5.

¹⁹ Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

²¹ Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 128, see also 447.

²³ Schutz, "The Problem of Rationality in the Social World," 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

weapons threaten to bring us under their control, rendering us less and less “masters in our own right to define what is, and what is not relevant to us,”²⁵ we might have to resort to some defensive measures in order to deal with this imposed relevance that would threaten all other relevances. In another setting, I have referred to such meta-level strategies as a matter of “hypermastery.”²⁶

Similarly, the corona pandemic stands as an imposed relevance threatening our systems of relevance, but likewise the policies recommended by experts, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and other hygienic measures, might endanger the system of relevances of some in-groups more than even the virus itself, at least in their view. This takes place to such a degree that they might seek to destroy or undermine such policies taken to interfere with their pursuit of happiness and the manners in which they master and secure their lives. There is at work in pragmatic everyday life a dynamic bent on self-mastery, a domination of one’s circumstances, of securing life as one knows it for one’s in-group. This dynamic, begun in childhood and continually developing as life progresses, resorts to higher and higher level strategies, such as erecting entire media empires or mobilizing extensive, high-level political action – all for the sake of securing hyper-mastery, that is, to ensure that one’s established life is not interfered with or undermined.

After describing everyday life, Schutz turns to non-pragmatic finite provinces of meaning, such as phantasying, dreaming, and theoretical science, whose cognitive features include a specific *epoché* by which one breaks with pragmatic everyday life and a form of spontaneity by which one embraces non-pragmatic relevances. As a province of meaning, scientific theorizing “does not serve any practical purpose. Its aim is not to master the world but to observe and possibly to understand it.”²⁷ While people in everyday life pause to adopt theoretical attitudes, to consider problems, or meditate on public opinion, such reflective “enclaves” are performed for practical ends. As a result, they differ in their guiding relevance from the “pure” scientific theoretic province of meaning – the prototype for the scientific knowledge for which experts strive. Well-informed citizens likewise participate in the pure scientific province of meaning when they assess expert recommendations and expose themselves to insiders and commentators whose relevances differ considerably from their own.

The paradigm of the well-informed citizen is undermined when the scientific-theoretic *epoché* and its relevances lose motivational force, and people are guided only by the intrinsic relevances of an in-group focused on ensuring mastery of its environment and the happiness such mastery procures. This failure becomes clear to the extent that one or one’s in-group authors or endorses false beliefs not accurate to the reality at hand. However, much the protagonists of such an in-group argue or appeal to evidence, after the patterns found in social media or cable television, they give the impression of inhabiting the province of scientific theorizing, but they are in fact pursuing a project of hyper-mastery to protect lower-level intrinsic relevances. In effect, they remain within the province of meaning of everyday life and its relevances and subordinate the province of scientific theorizing to its purposes. They don the trappings of science without its core values, thereby subverting it. Nietzsche, of course, would interpret the pretense of engaging in putative detached theorizing aimed at truth as a masterful way of concealing the power motivations already at work, in which one would appear to be only concerned about the facts of the case and in which the word “power” might never even appear.²⁸

1.4 Radical pragmatism/the province of religious experience

In “Reflections on the Problem of Relevance,” Schutz imagines a “radical pragmatism”²⁹ that would reduce any knowledge to its usefulness for coming to terms with the surrounding world and that would take the

²⁵ Schutz, “The Well-Informed Citizen,” 129.

²⁶ Barber, *Religion and Humor as Emancipating Provinces of Meaning*, 44.

²⁷ Schutz, “On Multiple Realities,” 245.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 28.

²⁹ Schutz, “Reflections on the Problem of Relevance,” 164.

success or failure of doing so as its criteria of truth for knowledge. In this view, there would be no other reality than everyday reality based on working.³⁰ The view explained above, subordinating the theoretical province of meaning to pragmatic purposes, dissolving any notion that experts might know more than non-experts, and exploding the framework of “The Well-Informed Citizen,” would all be strategies of such a radical pragmatism. It subsumes the province of scientific theory within the sphere of pragmatic everyday life and reduces argumentation and theorizing to nothing more than an effort to establish mastery or hyper-mastery. However, the problem is how one would go about demonstrating that radical pragmatism is true, since one would have to appeal to eidetic intuitions about what philosophy and truth are and, to do this, one would have to appeal to the Husserlian ideal of the evidential having of eidetic claims as part of a project shaped self-responsibly “according to ultimate evidences it has itself produced.”³¹ In pursuing evidentially based eidetic claims, one, then, would not be testing those views for their usefulness in coming to terms with the world, and hence, as Schutz observes, “*Pragmatic theory of knowledge can never explain what the pragmatic philosopher does.*”³² If one needs further corroboration about whether scientific theory seeks to observe and possibly understand the world rather than master it, one might consult one’s own motivations as one reads this article and ask whether one is judging the truth of what is said here on the basis of whether its claims find fulfillment in the evidential having of what theory is or truth means or whether they are considering whether the claims made facilitate mastery of everyday life. The former would seem to be clearly the case.

Finally, in the case of the pandemic, some religious approaches, which themselves could be seen as based finally on motivations of mastering everyday life, could be seen to converge with this pragmatic undermining of the ultimate relevances and motivations of the theoretical scientific province. Such religious approaches might, for example, dismiss scientific evidence and assert that the corona virus is really not dangerous and that one should continue to control and maintain one’s dominance in everyday life as always. Hence, one should continue to participate in religious services as always, without protections such as social distancing or masks. Instead, one ought to just trust that God will protect those who do so, that is, those who place their trust in God and refuse to be cowed by the boogeyman of the virus. In such a case, because one trusts in God’s protection against the virus, it would simply be unnecessary to engage in any scientific consideration of the origin or structure of the virus (like the man-in-the-street). However, the presence of the pandemic would nevertheless continue to appear to be a kind of imposed relevance, with which one must come to terms, even if some religious modes of coming to terms are tantamount to denying its danger. If those adopting such a tack take as their ultimate motivation simply to maintain intact their everyday life pattern of mastery, including regularly partaking in religious services, without any adjustments being called for on their part, then they might be able to be seen as simply pressing God into the service of their pragmatic motivations. They would be relying on their religious worldview to dismiss the threat of the virus as an imposed relevance (ironically as a way of coming to terms with it). Perhaps what would cinch the fact that such an approach merely subjugates the religious province of meaning to the pragmatic world of everyday life would be that the religious group might push ahead with its pragmatic agenda and at no point allow for any communal discernment about whether God might not want people to take precautions in the face of the virus. In such a case, it would appear that these religious believers just presume that God supports what they have already determined ought not be touched.

However, I have argued elsewhere³³ that the province of religious experience involves ranking the religious absolute itself above such pragmatic relevances and allowing confidence in the absolute to liberate one and one’s group from anxieties about pragmatic success. In this case, the finite province of religious experience would actually share with province of theoretical science a de-absolutization of the pursuit of mastery. Such a religious outlook might then be disposed to take seriously evidence-based

³⁰ Ibid., 165.

³¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 6, 57–8.

³² Schutz, “Reflections on the Problem of Relevance,” 165.

³³ Barber, *Religion and Humor as Emancipating Provinces of Meaning*, 110–3, 124–8.

scientific findings regarding the pandemic – as a first step, to be followed by discernment about the religious significance of the virus. Such discernment might take account of the religious and ethical responsibilities involved in dealing with this imposed relevance, now recognized in the fullness of its imposedness, and possibly indicative of God’s perspective on what needs to be done. All of these considerations could be conceived as part of an endeavor to integrate the imposed relevance of the virus with the system of intrinsic relevances prevailing in the religious group, such as trying to do what God wants or being accountable to one’s responsibilities to one’s neighbor in accord with divine mandates. Furthermore, this type of religious outlook could even be thought to be an ally³⁴ with science insofar as both circumscribe pragmatic relevances bent on mastery and insofar as this religious perspective does not dismiss outright the illumination that science could provide regarding the imposed relevance of the pandemic. Such illumination, though, would only be a piece of such a religious community’s discernment (a kind of theoretical enclave within the province of religious experience) about how to accommodate this imposed relevance within the system of its adherents’ intrinsic system of religious relevances.

2 The crisis in racial relationships

In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, another problem, racism against Black people, which has afflicted the United States and much of the Western world for centuries, surfaced and provoked mass national and international outrage. This outrage exploded when a video-tape showed a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling for eight minutes and forty-six seconds on the neck of African-American George Floyd until he died, although Floyd had been apprehended only for supposedly paying a store with a counterfeit \$20 bill. The repeated killing of innocent and unarmed Black persons by police and “vigilantes” assuming the role of the police stirred associations with the United States’s four-century history of the enslavement of Africans, lynchings, Jim Crow restrictions, excessive incarceration rates, and a multitude of racist economic, political, and social structures and policies. Just surveying this history, one can observe long and deep-seated patterns of thinking and acting in which white people considered themselves superior to Black people and able to exert power over them and do whatever they wanted to them with a sense of immunity. These many injustices have pointed to what many commentators have called a sense of “white supremacy,” and such a sense appeared strikingly in the actions of Office Chauvin, oblivious or indifferent to the fact that his actions were being taped and suggestive of the thousands and thousands of unseen similar actions inflicted upon Black people by white officials, police, or vigilantes over centuries long before video-capturing cell phones were invented. It has been suggested that the massive worldwide protests following George Floyd’s death simply reflect how masses of people simply wished to escape the tedium imposed by COVID-19 restrictions and/or to experience some enlivening stimulation in the face of the anxiety and depression produced by the massive unemployment and economic stress that the pandemic continues to produce. However, there is a much deeper connection between the health and racial crises in that each reveal the destructive presence of the drive for pragmatic mastery, genetically growing out of a quite normal and natural sense of the “I can” acquired in infancy through such basic actions as locomotion. As seen above, on the basis of an overweening pursuit of pragmatic mastery and of the unrestrained exercise of one’s “I can,” in-groups have defied the constraints that the maintenance of public health might require and have even striven to subvert the anti-pragmatic norms that ought to govern the theoretical and religious finite provinces of meaning, thereby undermining Schutz’s typology of the well-informed citizen. A clue to this conjunction of white supremacism with resistance to pandemic public health restrictions in the service of an unfettered “I can,” can be found in the fact that Michael and William Null, who were

³⁴ Such a way of conceiving the religious-scientific relationship runs counter to the false narrative of science and religion as enemies, a narrative informing contemporary secularization themes, according to Charles Taylor, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 574–5.

recently apprehended as part of a group of militiamen planning to kidnap and try the Governor of Michigan because of the health pandemic prohibitions she had put in place. The Nulls also appeared in an April protest rally in the capitol of Michigan that opposed Governor Whitmer's ordinances and displayed prominently confederate flags. Such flags have been taken to symbolize white dominance over Blacks to the extent that even southern states like Mississippi have removed vestiges of these flags from their state flags. In addition, a month later the brothers appeared at a protest to defend a confederate statue.³⁵ Those resisting policies aimed at preventing the spread of the pandemic seem to have easily associated themselves with symbols of white racism and supremacism.

To understand how the impulse for pragmatic mastery with its sense of an unbridled "I can" lies at the root of white supremacy, it is instructive to consider the particular cruelty that white supremacists have displayed toward Black persons with disabilities. For example, in a recent column, "The Tulsa Massacre Revisited," Brent Staples describes how white vigilantes invading Greenwood, Oklahoma, in 1921, engaged in one particularly heinous action, a piece of gratuitous cruelty: dragging to death behind a speeding car an elderly black man with disabilities.³⁶ This man, who had lost his sight and had had both legs amputated, sold pencils and sang for coins for his living. Moreover, the oppressive restrictions imposed on African-Americans and known as "Jim Crow" laws can, according to legend, be traced back to an original "Jim Crow." This first "Jim Crow" was a black stable groom with some disabilities, who, while working, sang and danced with contorted movements.³⁷ Thus, racism throughout its history has directed some of its most ferocious violence and cruelest ridicule toward Black people with disabilities, and the historical origin of "Jim Crow" practices suggests that anti-black racism and ableism have been intimately intertwined from the inception of those practices. It is also of significance that President Trump, who has repeatedly shown sympathies with white supremacists, has also repeatedly resorted to ridiculing people with disabilities, from reporters to his political rival, Joe Biden, whom he recently jokingly portrayed in a doctored twitter picture as sitting in a wheel chair in a senior home and whom he named "the new resident" instead of "the new president." Trump conjoins sympathy toward white supremacism and ableist derision, even if there is no one single person who both is Black and has disabilities whom he has disparaged.

Ironically, the exaggerated feeling of "I can" characterizing white supremacists reflects the often unreflected-upon experience of white men in general, who regularly exercise their "I can," for instance, by walking through a shopping center or driving down a city street, without any fear of being stopped by the police, with a sense of immunity. However, African-American men "cannot," insofar as they must be continually wary of being suspected or stopped. Philosopher Sarah Ahmed characterizes Black male bodies as moving through space with a sense of "I cannot"³⁸ – epitomized most appallingly when a policeman forcefully subjugated George Floyd by kneeling on his neck until he died. In addition, centuries of economic and social "confinement" have excluded black men, making them Strangers, even in their own country.

Although persons with disabilities may experience a limited sense of "I can" with respect to those aspects in which they experience disability in comparison with others without those specific disabilities, one cannot reduce their lives to being straight-jacketed by a sense of "I cannot." On the contrary they often come to terms with such disabilities by learning to exercise a creative, new "I can," living full, productive, and loving lives – equally as rich or even richer than those without such disabilities. Also, although Black men encounter the social imposed sense of "I cannot" that Ahmed depicts, like persons with disabilities they have configured their own lives in generous and creative ways, despite all the societal pressures and practices aligned against them. Nevertheless, the ableist majority, without appreciating the lives and creativity of persons with disabilities, often regard them as simply "unable," inferior, or even as laughable in comparison with themselves whom they think of simply as able to manifest pragmatic mastery without hindrance. Such ableist prejudices imposed upon persons with disabilities converge with the racist

³⁵ Bogel-Burroughs, "What We Know About the Alleged Plot to Kidnap Michigan's Governor."

³⁶ Staples, "The Burning of Black Wall Street, Revisited."

³⁷ Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying*, 84.

³⁸ Ahmed, "The Phenomenology of Whiteness," 161.

prejudices to which African-American men are repeatedly subjected. Likewise, those who operate with such prejudices regularly fail to appreciate the creativity with which members of both groups overcome with greatness of soul the degradation leveled at them.

I have argued in Section 1 that in this time of the pandemic the desire for pragmatic mastery and its ever-expanding sense of “I can” can undermine the desire to understand the world (rather than master it) that Schutz posits at the center of his conception of the well-informed citizen and its supporting theoretical province of meaning. This same struggle for mastery is also, as I have been demonstrating in this section, at work in the deep presumptions of racism and ableism. But the cruelty manifested toward racial minorities or persons with disabilities and especially toward those who fall within both groups can perhaps be further explained by considering the twin threats that racial minorities and those with disabilities pose to the racist and ableist pursuit of uninhibited mastery: an ethical and an ontological threat.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas recognizes the widely spread, contemporary philosophical belief that basic human identity depends on developing a sense of “I can” by mastering one’s environment. Children acquire this sense when crawling from one place to another or eventually managing the intricacies of a language, and adults do so by dominating the contingencies of personal life and career. But Levinas places this sense of “I can” in a wider context. Within one’s own house, in which one knows where everything is and maneuvers without a second thought, one inhabits a site of “I can.” However, this sense of mastery at home is disturbed by the approach of the Stranger, the one who is not in my home, who comes from elsewhere, and who is different from me. Over the Stranger, Levinas comments “I have no *power* (*je ne peux pouvoir*).”³⁹ In Levinas’s Jewish tradition, the Stranger is one of the three privileged groups (along with widows and orphans) to whom people are especially ethically obligated. These three groups represent those outside the “mainstream;” and their lives are particularly precarious and endangered: the Stranger who feels isolated or peripheral, the widow having lost a lifelong companion, or orphans without a parent. For Levinas, one’s sense of “I can” is limited and constrained by the ethical accountability due to those who are not like oneself and who experience most acutely their vulnerability. Whatever mastery one may want to exercise always happens in relation to such others who summon one to an ethical accountability with which they find themselves inescapably confronted.

Clearly those with disabilities or Black people stand on the circumference of the circle of the majority of those who do not have disabilities or who are white, and the very history of disparagement, injustice, violence, and neglect that these minority groups have suffered for centuries testifies to the social imperilment they face. In the Levinasian scheme, their lives are therefore of heightened ethical significance. What kind of ethical accountability would be due them? Certainly – and first and foremost – they ought not be suppressed, treated unequally, deprived of rights, or be made the butt of one’s humor. In their case, one in the majority ought to set aside false majoritarian considerations in order that one might listen to them and understand their histories, the injustices they may have suffered, and the accommodations and compensations they deserve. Responsive to such minorities, society needs to dismantle the institutional mechanisms of exclusion and to ensure that sufficient resources are available to them to realize themselves in all their uniqueness and irreducibility to majoritarian cultural expectations. Part of the ethical accountability due to such minority groups involves recognizing and rejoicing in what they have achieved, often with great creativity and love in the face of obstacles they encountered. Ethical accountability finally precludes any condescending paternalism that might perpetuate the sense of superiority that can hide itself beneath do-gooding and that has for centuries demeaned such minorities.⁴⁰

The recent protests at the Michigan capitol in April 2020 against the restraints imposed to prevent the spread of the corona virus, actually reveal how Levinasian responsibility stands opposed to the “I can” of

³⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

⁴⁰ To be sure, one might raise these issues in terms of a normative ethics, such as Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative that requires respect for persons as ends in themselves. What normative ethics would correspond with the Levinasian imperative experienced in the face to face is another question, which cannot be addressed within the limits of this article.

pragmatic mastery. When the protestors proudly marched holding aloft the Confederate flag, symbol of the institution that had defended the enslavement of African-Americans, these protestors, it would seem, were unconcerned for those earlier African-American generations who were devalued and suffered grievously under the institution of slavery. Similarly, they seem to lack any regard for the descendants of these slaves in the present who might feel that the revived glorification of the Confederacy merely accentuates that they too are of lesser value – as even the state of Mississippi recognized. Likewise, these protesters were also resisting the idea that anyone could impose upon them public health restrictions like the wearing of masks, interfering with their right to do whatever they wanted to do, circumscribing their unlimited sense of “I can” for the sake of others. Such resistance amounts in effect to an insistence that they be entitled to do whatever they wanted, seemingly without any regard for how their being able to do whatever they want might impact those who are more vulnerable to the corona virus than they are. They feel dispensed from any ethical responsibility for the other person, who for Levinas marks out the boundaries of anyone’s exercise of freedom, who summons one to responsibility despite the fact that the summons often, perhaps usually, goes unheeded.⁴¹ The protests at the Michigan capitol demonstrate how a limit-transgressing will to pragmatic mastery underpins the twin crises of COVID-19 and the massive racial protests characterizing the spring and summer of 2020.

But in addition to this ethical question of responsibility that Blacks and those with disabilities pose to the white majority without disabilities, there is an ontological factor involved. For those who conceive their sense of “I can” as unfettered, those with disabilities serve as a constant reminder that anyone’s possession of abilities is always ultimately a contingent matter and that when it comes to one’s physical or psychical abilities, one is always fragile, vulnerable, and incapable of definitively preserving and protecting oneself. Likewise, one can imagine how white supremacists must be aware or perhaps haunted on some level that the economic and cultural limitations with which African-Americans struggle and that constrain their sense of “I can” is the result of centuries of the cruelty and institutional domination implemented by the majority culture. Consequently, to the extent that white supremacists could be aware of such a history, they would have to recognize that their much less constricted sense of “I can” is ultimately the result of just happening to have been born white, undoing thereby any pretense to any idea of racial superiority. To be sure, white supremacists are not unlimited and they often experience, for instance, economic and other insecurities, but one way of compensating for their lack of power and concealing it is to cling to the false idea of their racial superiority over others.

Black persons with disabilities unite in one person membership in two distinct groups whose members issue an enhanced call to responsibility because of their heightened vulnerability and history, and this enhanced call is doubled insofar as membership in both groups coincide in a single individual. In addition to their elevated ethical significance, individuals belonging to both groups stand as a persistent, impressive, and doubly weighted reminder that the sense of pragmatic mastery and superiority of white supremacists without disabilities is based only on contingencies over which they have no control. When such forceful challenges collide with that feeling of mastery and “I can” that has rarely been circumscribed, one can imagine a variety of possible responses that white supremacists might undertake. Supremacists could, although it is unlikely, allow themselves to be converted and respond respectfully to their others, or they might try to ignore them, or, given the weightiness of the challenges, they might resort to the extreme response that we find in the Tulsa tragedy or a century of Jim Crow practices, the use of violence, cruelty, or humor to obliterate being interrogated by others.

One possible objection might be that the argument here seems to imply that white supremacists on some level perceive the disturbing demands that Black persons with disabilities raise before choosing freely to inflict violence upon them. Instead, one might object that they are already so hardened and shaped by their past and their pertinence to their in-group that they are incapable of allowing themselves to be in any way touched by another. Three counter-arguments, though, can be made. Lewis Gordon, for instance, contends that racists participate in “bad faith” insofar as even to be able to deny humanity to their victims,

⁴¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35.

they need to have recognized that they were human first.⁴² Racists at some level recognize the humanity of the other, or in Levinasian terms, the other's summons to responsibility even as the condition of possibility of denying it. Likewise, one can reflect on one's own experience. For instance, I myself at times, seeing the people around our university who beg money coming toward me, cross over to the other side of the street to avoid them. In reflection, I am able to discover subsequently what I was unaware of when I crossed the street, namely that I did feel a call to responsibility for them, but was unwilling to entangle myself in a process of trying to determine whether to give them money or not or what strategy to adopt, and so I just selfishly decided to avoid them. Hence, the other's summons affects one beneath the level of explicit consciousness, and one only becomes cognizant of its trace later in reflection. Finally, it is possible from a later perspective, after having inflicted violence on another, to unearth what it was that evoked such a response – as this article seeks to do in the cases of the Tulsa Massacre and the Jim Crow “tradition” – and thereby to give some explanation of the violence inflicted. Of course, such interpretation after the event always remains an interpretation. But the idea that white supremacists have an exaggerated sense of their own pragmatic mastery and resort to violence against those whose very being accentuates the limits of such mastery (through more intense ethical demands and ontological reminders of the contingency of all their abilities) provides an explanation that that does seem to correlate with the particularly vicious cruelty patent in Tulsa and Jim Crow.

3 Conclusion

The purpose of this article has simply been to show how the twin crises of the inadequate responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and of the racism that surfaced in George Floyd's death and that evoked massive international protests are linked. The article began by demonstrating how in the current pandemic, those intent on protecting themselves against any expert-recommended interference with their everyday pragmatic relevances and fortified by the pseudo-theories propagated by social media and cable television could undermine Schutz's ideal of the well-informed citizen. In effect, they end up eliminating any experts to consult since everyone becomes their own expert. In addition, this new type of man-in-the-street has been buttressed by a massive project of institutional hyper-mastery in which the theoretical province of meaning (so crucial for experts) seeking to understand the world rather than master it is also marginalized or subjected to demolition.

When one finds these people, opposed to any measures recommended by scientists or experts to limit the effects and spread of the pandemic, also in their protests raising aloft the confederate flag, the symbol of past state-sponsored racism, one can detect a clue for seeing how the desire for unimpeded pragmatic mastery that resists any constraints in the case of the pandemic can be connected with white supremacist ideology revealed in George Floyd's murder. In George Floyd's death, one can see in the officer kneeling on his neck until death an instance of someone acting with a pragmatic sense of “I can,” with the sense of immunity and impunity that has characterized white supremacy for centuries. Both resistance to any protective measures against the corona virus and white supremacism exemplify the endeavor to maintain unchecked pragmatic mastery (often underpinned by social media and institutions aiming at “hyper-mastery”). This idea becomes strengthened when one considers how white supremacists have reserved particularly brutal violence and ridicule for Black persons with disabilities (in the Tulsa massacre and in the origins of “Jim Crow” practices). Anyone who is African-American or who has a disability (and especially those with both features), it would seem, can constitute a standing ethical and ontological threat to the pragmatic mastery at the heart of white supremacism. Thus, Black persons and persons with disabilities, precisely due to their oppression and vulnerability, stand as a constant ethical reminder to white supremacists of their ethical obligations to such groups, in accord with Levinas's views. In addition, African-

⁴² Gordon, “Phenomenology and Race,” 295.

Americans and those with disabilities continually remind supremacists that they have not earned the sense of mastery and supremacy on which they may pride themselves, but rather this mastery and supremacy depends on unjust, unfair social structures that they have benefited from by being born white and on physical and historical contingencies beyond anyone's control. No wonder they have found Black persons with disabilities particularly menacing to them and instead of responding with compassion, humility, or the willingness to change society on their behalf, they have sought to obliterate the challenges to them such persons pose. The zeal for mastery serves as the link connecting the polarized response to the pandemic and the simultaneous, pointed re-appearance of racial injustice that has provoked worldwide outrage.

Above, too, it was mentioned that some religious groups might be completely interested in preserving their present everyday relevances and carrying on as usual their everyday projects without any modifications in the face of the pandemic. Some have insisted that God would take care of them if they gathered in large maskless, crammed-together groups for services. Further, they have denounced scientists rather than dialogue with them, and have engaged in no dialogue with their own members about what might be appropriate or even what God might desire. Such forms of behavior, in effect, subordinate the religious province of meaning to pragmatic, everyday interests, which the religious province of meaning by its *epoché* and form of spontaneity assign a secondary place in relation to the absolute, to God. When it comes to locating pragmatic interests as secondary, I have suggested that religion and science can be allies. In addition, participants in the religious sphere find their ultimate identity in being loved and valued by God, in such a way that even if one does not realize as one might wish the pragmatic purposes whose achievement one considers of great value, one still has a source of ultimate value and worth in God. Similarly, religious persons, unlike supremacists, need not try to establish an impregnable identity by unjustly maintaining dominance over others or firmly securing their abilities against the contingencies of nature or fate – to the point that one might resort to violence to obliterate whatever reminds them of their powerlessness. There too, one's worth depends on being valued by God as one is. The religious province of meaning affords one a source of self-worth that does not at all depend on securing one's pragmatic drive to mastery and frees one from any desperate efforts to do so.

While laws, ethical practices, and institutional structures are needed to protect and help Black minorities and persons with disabilities – and also those particularly vulnerable to contracting the corona virus, there are and will be persons who seem interested only in their pragmatic mastery; who seem quite willing to undermine respectful discourse and to subversively press into service the theoretical or religious finite provinces of meaning; who think themselves superior to others; who want only to protect themselves against laws even if those laws secure the safety of others. In regard to such people, who most probably would be rather obnoxious or undesirable discourse partners, the Levinasian ethical context nevertheless requires us to engage even them respectfully in discourse, the kind of discourse that Schutz's examples of the well-informed citizen and the denizen of the finite province of theoretical contemplation envisioned and depended upon. To do otherwise, to refuse such engagement, would be to take refuge in one's own in-group and to support the self-enclosure in in-groups focused on exercising their own "I can" in pursuance of pragmatic mastery over others.

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