

Welcoming the Other in a Pandemic Society

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

1. Introduction

‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ This biblical question from the Old Testament has gained more resonance since the emergence of the coronavirus disease COVID-19). Am I responsible for the well-being of the other? The fight against the coronavirus demands from me that I not merely follow the rules for my own sake, but also for the sake of the other. Examples that immediately come to mind are social distancing, wearing a face mask, working from home, regular hand washing and testing for an infection. To abide by these rules is a show of support in the spirit of solidarity, sometimes described as ‘corona solidarity’.¹ This notion signals the ethos of responsibility we should have for each other, prompted by the coronavirus. However, it is not entirely clear what solidarity means in practice. Does it show solidarity to deny friends or family the opportunity to visit their elderly loved ones in nursing homes? Moreover, what about the allocation of intensive care beds on the basis of age as the main criterion? Or the closure of schools to keep children and even parents at home to slow down the spread of the disease? The longer the coronavirus is present, the more people are questioning the necessity of corona measures and the way they are enforced.

It is through discourse that these questions arise and are discussed. The notion of discourse refers to a system of meanings through which we engage with people and things. What counts as solidarity is understood in terms of shifting meanings or meaningful practices. With the projection of COVID-19 as a crisis of pandemic proportions, a so-called crisis discourse has emerged in which politicians generate new meanings to get a sense of stability and normalization within society.² This coronavirus crisis discourse (hereinafter referred to as coronavirus discourse) can be conceived as an attempt to arrive at a new shared understanding of a world that has fundamentally changed due to the virus. In this regard many governments have called upon modern science and technology to make sense of the virus in order to establish and help legitimize their corona policies. Consequently, scientists have become faces for corona policy in several countries where there are substantive research efforts, for example, dr. Anthony Fauci in the United States and dr. Anders Tegnell in Sweden. The Dutch government receives its advice from a body of specialists and experts (Outbreak Management Team) chaired by dr. Jaap van Dissel.

1 Compare *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 29689, nr. 1073, 3; Rosaliene Israël and Erik Olsman, ‘Laat coronasolidariteit een blijvertje zijn’, *Het Parool*, 25 May 2021, Opinion section; Björn Bremer and Philip Genschel, ‘Corona Solidarity’, *EUIdeas*, 7 May 2020, <https://euideas.eui.eu/2020/05/07/corona-solidarity/>.

2 In some countries the virus has not been treated as a crisis, including Brazil under the Bolsonaro administration and the United States under the Trump administration.

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

For the government, the primary objective is to optimize its performance: the most efficient equation of government measures and obtained results. This is accompanied by a calculative mode of thinking, in which the encounter with the other, the social relationship, is quantified or made programmable. All kinds of factors are taken into account to increase the output (the control of the virus) and cutback of the input (the restrictions upon the freedom of citizens). What should be problematized, however, is that even the principle of solidarity is subjected to calculative demands of the corona policies within the discourse; the policies dictate the parameters through which the responsibility for the other gains its form. To be solidary with one another is not only bound by the rules, but is also often equated with rule abidance.

In this contribution, we aim to critically reflect upon this conception of solidarity by asking what the meaning and scope of solidarity is in a society at the mercy of a pandemic. We question the formulation of solidarity within the coronavirus discourse by drawing upon insights of Levinas and Derrida. Here solidarity is characterized as the primary responsibility we bear for the other, to which the other as 'wholly other' invites me. This is not a collective responsibility that I choose to accept or dismiss; instead, it is a unique responsibility which inescapably is entrusted to me. The appeal of the other, that manifests itself in the presence of the face (*visage*), cannot be addressed in a general sense. It desires a personal response which cannot be captured by a single rule or calculation; rather, it is rooted in ethical openness for what the concrete situations asks of me. From this perspective, solidarity compels us to critically reflect on the corona policy.

In what follows, we will first give an outline of what a discourse entails and the disruption that followed the outbreak of the virus. This provides us with a basic knowledge of the way discourse shapes our understanding of the world and how the coronavirus constituted a new arrangement of meanings. It will also equip us with the necessary tools to scrutinize the principle of solidarity. Specific attention will therefore go out to the encounter with the other, the social relation, since this is the primary domain of solidarity. In addition, we aim to focus on the legitimation of the corona policy and the way in which the criterion of performativity (or efficiency) relates to solidarity. Against this backdrop, we like to present a distinctive approach of responsibility for the other as formulated by the works of Emmanuel Levinas. This responsibility resists the calculative tendency of the coronavirus discourse to reduce the other to an object or theme under the heading of solidarity. Although Derrida sides with Levinas to a considerable degree, we argue that he places solidarity in the distance between the meanings of the coronavirus discourse (calculability) and the face of the other that commands me (beyond calculation). In the final section we will explore this further with regard to the notion of undecidability.

2. Discourse and identities

The concept of discourse relates to one of the key insights of Martin Heidegger that our understanding of the world is founded on and guided by a fore-understanding, that is derived from one's concrete existential situation.³ This fore-understanding is not objective or thematic in nature, but signifies a preconceptual understanding that stems from a practical dealing with people and things. We are thrown into the world; in other words, situated in meaningful discourses and practices, which is not of our choosing but wherein we always find ourselves.

Building on Heidegger, the very notion of discourse has given rise to various definitions, that exceed its common meaning as conversation or debate. Specifically, thinkers associated with poststructuralism, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have put forward the most comprehensive discussion of discourses. Taking these authors as a starting point, David Howarth defines discourses as 'historically specific systems of meanings that form the identities of subjects and objects'.⁴ These specific systems can be related to political, economic, scientific, legal, religious or other realms. Identities are about the various manifestations or manifold positions, which people or things, such as an elderly person, a nurse or infectious disease can have.⁵ It concerns all possible meanings pertaining to something or someone as part of a particular discourse. For instance, an 'elderly person' is an identity that can mean many things, such as vulnerable, not economically viable, but also discursive meanings such as wise or holy can be articulated, or linked to the 'elderly person'. This, in turn, helps to shape other identities. Hence, discourses are 'system of meanings' which highlights that identities are dependent on each other; if an *elderly* person is articulated as 'not economically viable', a *young* person is most likely to be presented as a near opposite. Discourses display a 'relational' constellation of meanings of young/old, strong/weak since 'meaning is conferred by particular systems of significant differences'.⁶

Through our historically located horizon of socially shared meanings, we view our world and engage with people and things. We approach people and things through discourses and meaningful practices by which their identities are configured, that is, socially related to each other.⁷ This does not mean that relations between identities cannot change: identities are not fully solidified and at times even contested. For example, the coronavirus was initially associated with the flu, a lower death rate, and therefore it was associated with a lack of urgency to receive special-

3 See Martin Heidegger, *Zijn en Tijd*, trans. Mark Wildschut (Nijmegen: Sun, 2013), 196-202.

4 David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 9, 11.

5 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2003), 115. David Howarth, *Discourse*, 108.

6 Howarth, *Discourse*, 101. Other binaries are, for instance, black/white, male/female, developed/developing, depending on the discourse.

7 In the post-structuralist literature the notion of 'social relation' can equally pertain to both people and things. In this contribution we will only speak of the social relation as the encounter with another human being.

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

ist emergency care. The identities are always in flux since subjects and objects are in need of repeated fixation of meanings. As Paul Ricoeur writes as part of a hermeneutic account of discourse, discourse has a 'fleeting existence' which 'appears and disappears'. He adds: 'Discourse, we shall say, is realized as event but understood as meaning.'⁸ Similarly, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe find that identities can never find completeness: the articulated meanings only fill up momentarily through their partial fixture in the discourse.⁹ Nevertheless, some understandings can become more salient in a particular context than others. A hospital is *normally* a location where you always have access to specialist help, at least in most wealthier countries. Also, your home is not often regarded as your workspace since you regularly have to 'go to work'. The subjects and objects are thus 'assumed' to mean certain things over others; the elderly person is usually identified as 'not economically viable' rather than 'holy'. These everyday assumptions about what subjects and objects mean to us are taken for granted and accepted as normal in our daily lives.

In pre-corona times, our relationship with the other is thus deemed familiar to us; the other is a friend, grandfather, neighbor, colleague, physician, but can also be a thief or a drunk and so on. All these relations are discursive in that the other can be identified through the partial fixation of particular meanings. The friend or neighbor is identified by its familiar qualities and roles which pertain to particular assumptions. In the everydayness of our conduct toward people and things, the other remains implicit. The other is taken for granted within our habitual activities as our daily conduct is submerged in meaningful discourses and practices.¹⁰ When I walk outside in the Netherlands during the day, I assume that I will not be assaulted by the runner that passes me by and when I head to the supermarket to buy groceries, I am not reflectively aware of all the assumptions that guide my actions and dealings with other customers or employees. We know our way around in the world without always being thematically aware of our surroundings. With reference to Heidegger, these assumptions are enabled through prior understanding set in a historical background and not as a reflective process of the human mind.¹¹

3. The coronavirus as rupture of the discourse

The coronavirus presents a rupture through which our reality and accompanying assumptions are disrupted. The confrontation with the (threatening) virus changes our relationship with people and things as it constitutes a new arrangement. The partly stable and secure articulations of meanings and identities are unsettled. What is disrupted is our *experience* that cannot find meaning in the pre-existing

8 Paul Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics', in *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 48.

9 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, 111.

10 Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, 109.

11 See Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2007), 158.

discourse.¹² This is also described as dislocation, which is the case when a particular event does not match the assumptions; it cannot be represented by the meanings, and therefore, not be integrated within the former horizon of meanings.¹³ This rupture helps to realize a coronavirus discourse through which new identities are formulated.¹⁴ To put it more specifically, our friends become a potential danger and our homes turn into workspaces. Subjects including politicians and the media can formulate a new discourse: the virus can be made meaningful through their discursive utterances. In other words, 'if the structure is dislocated and thus incomplete', there is an intervention by a subject 'to re-suture it'.¹⁵ In that moment, the politician or media representative is not determined by partly stable and secure meanings conferred to identities of the previous discourse. The crisis of identities demands a decision: it compels politicians and the media to identify anew and to act in an attempt to bring closure.¹⁶ This process of closure is a response to the rupture of meanings which never finds completion. It also designates the problematic of enclosing people and things in meanings, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

With regard to the disrupting effects of the coronavirus, parallels can be drawn with 9/11. Similar to the coronavirus crisis, scholars who study 9/11 argue that Americans were confronted with an event which challenged their assumptions more directly than other times.¹⁷ Americans experienced a situation of greater fragmentation of their partly stable assumptions through which they questioned their own identities. Their 'mode of being is experienced and disrupted'.¹⁸ Americans were thus acutely aware of the planes hitting the Twin Towers, but they were not able to give meaning to it as the event was not assumed to happen within their horizon of meanings. The attack by the second plane suggested foul play, but why would the land of the free be under attack and who was this enemy who seemingly

- 12 David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis', in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*, ed. David Howarth et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 14.
- 13 Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 148. Howarth and Stavrakakis argue that there are two ways to view dislocation; as the ever-present instability of identities that are always in flux, or an experience which cannot be represented through prior discursive meanings. Torfing refers here to the latter. See David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis', 14.
- 14 See a discussion about the realization of a crisis discourse: Laura Henderson, 'Crisis in the Courtroom: The Discursive Conditions of Possibility for Ruptures in Legal Discourse', *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2018): 56.
- 15 Aletta Norval, 'Hegemony after Deconstruction: The Consequences of Undecidability', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9, no. 2 (2004): 142.
- 16 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 60. See also David Howarth, *Discourse*, 109 for a discussion about how a subject can possibly take decisions by gaining room for their own political subjectivity rather than always being constrained by structures of meanings.
- 17 See for instance Jack Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis', *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2009): 275. Richard Jackson, 'Security, Democracy, and the Rhetoric of Counter-Terrorism', *Democracy and Security* 1, no. 2 (2005): 150. Dirk Nabers, 'Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in U.S. Foreign Policy after September 11, 2001', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, no. 2 (2009): 192.
- 18 Glynnos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, 110.

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

manifested itself out of nowhere? Some authors argue that there was initially a 'void of meaning', a discursive vacuum where the event was incomprehensible to the American public.¹⁹ The existing US foreign policy discourse failed to incorporate the meanings of the 9/11 event, which was eventually filled by the Bush administration and the media.²⁰ This rupture helped to articulate a new trajectory, the War on Terror discourse, which resonated with other already recurrent discursive meanings for US foreign policy. As Jack Holland writes, 'In and of itself, 9/11 was not a crisis' but it demanded a resolution where it was 'retrospectively constituted as a crisis'.²¹

In a similar way, the outbreak of the coronavirus in the Netherlands serves as a concrete example of a case in which the existing discourse failed to incorporate the new meanings that were brought into being due to the coronavirus. The experience for many citizens was an unfamiliar one. It was initially made meaningful by assuming, for instance, in the very early stages that the coronavirus was the equivalent to a fever and therefore one should remain level-headed about it, or that it would mainly remain a problem for China and unlikely to set foot in our backyard. Over the weeks, the virus was presented by the Outbreak Management Team as manageable for Dutch health services. Dutch society would not be vulnerable to the disease, even with cases of corona in other European countries at the rise.²² With the first patient in the Netherlands being diagnosed with the coronavirus on 27 February 2020, the disease continued to be treated as an illness that could remain local by containing it through simple hygienic measures and a few extra measures in the southern provinces where Carnival celebrations had been allowed to continue. The articulation of the disease as a real danger for fellow Dutch citizens did not fit the assumptions and was therefore not considered within the horizon of meanings. This event appeared to be unfathomable and was therefore not constituted as a crisis.

However, the coronavirus continued to spread; a few of the first patients lost their lives and several hundreds were committed to the hospital in the first week of March.²³ The virus constituted a rupture of assumptions held by the Dutch public whereafter partly stable assumptions shifted. There was a 'void of meaning' as in the case of 9/11, which demanded a resolution of how to understand and approach the virus. While Prime Minister Mark Rutte initially still called upon his fellow citizens to merely stop the practice of shaking hands, this was soon followed by an

- 19 Nabers, 'Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in U.S. Foreign Policy after September 11, 2001', 193. Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis', 277.
- 20 Initially, individual Americans therefore drew upon meanings from, for instance, popular culture, to comprehend and make sense of the event. See Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis', 277-279.
- 21 Holland, 'From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis', 283.
- 22 Frank Hendrickx and Huib Modderkolk, 'Februari: de verloren maand in de strijd tegen het coronavirus', *de Volkskrant*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/februari-de-verloren-maand-in-de-strijd-tegen-het-coronavirus~b09e4c7a8/>.
- 23 Derk Stokmans and Mark Lieveisse Adriaanse, 'Hoe Nederland de controle verloor: de corona-uitbraak van dag tot dag', *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/06/19/hoenederland-reageerde-op-het-nieuwe-virus-uit-china-van-niks-aan-de-hand-tot-blinde-paniek-a4003075>.

‘intelligent’ lockdown, an unprecedented trajectory for the country, even though the policy restrictions were relatively light.²⁴ Indeed, Prime Minister Rutte mentioned in the announcement of the ‘intelligent lockdown’ on 16 March: ‘Many people will recognize the feeling that we have been in a rollercoaster in these last few weeks which seems to be accelerating in speed. You ask yourself: Is this really happening?’²⁵

The coronavirus discourse enabled a new relationship with the other; the former relationship with the other does no longer hold. With the rupture of the discourse, the identities of people and things become visible; most of their relations need to be renewed against different meanings. The other becomes ‘seen’ as the assumptions suddenly change.²⁶ We gain awareness that our world does not look ‘natural’ to us anymore. The way we see our neighbor or a passer-by is not taken for granted anymore in our daily lives, but it emerges therein as a potential danger in light of the coronavirus from whom we literally have to distance ourselves in the public space. The rupture also manifests itself in a change of meaningful practices in approaching the other in our daily lives. We move away from the other on the sidewalk or we figure out when the supermarkets are the least crowded. There is a change in meaningful practices of washing hands and covering our mouths in order for us not to get into close proximity to the other. Indeed, the other is the one whom I need protection from through the spread of the coronavirus, but ironically, it is also the one who needs to be protected from the spread. This relationship with the other is thus accompanied by hygienic measures, measures at home, and restrictions in the public place. In the Dutch context, it meant the onset of the 1.5 meter society. This type of measure could not be easily integrated within the old discourse, similarly to avoiding handshakes, while earlier suggested hygienic measures (washing your hands, sneezing or coughing in the pit of your elbow or the use of paper napkins) could. The other thus becomes visible as part of the coronavirus crisis. Our everyday practices become more visible to us as they are ‘experienced’ through the risks we take and the weighing of these risks in each instance of encountering the other. These weighing of risks become part of our reflective foreground until the new situation is normalized.

4. Performativity and solidarity

As we have discussed in the previous section, a new coronavirus discourse emerged following the rupture in our daily lives. In an attempt to bring closure, many politicians generated new meanings so as to gain a sense of security and normalization within society. In order to do that, politicians try to overtake other meaningful

24 The void of meaning also manifested itself in light of meaningful practices such as the handshake. Until the announcement on 9 March 2020, Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the Minister of Health Bruno Bruins even continued to shake hands with delegates up to 5 March 2020.

25 Prime Minister Mark Rutte, ‘TV-toespraak van minister-president Mark Rutte’, *Rijksoverheid*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2020/03/16/tv-toespraak-van-minister-president-mark-rutte>.

26 Howarth, *Discourse*, 109.

understandings in a coalition with scientists. The formation and maintenance of such a coalition is also referred to as a 'hegemonic' political project, where assumptions about the coronavirus are shared and reinforced through policies to which the public is swayed to comply.²⁷ Without this coalition, assumptions about the coronavirus would be more open for contestation.²⁸ The discourse is an attempt to limit the struggle of the 'true' meaning of the coronavirus and the nature of government intervention, amongst groups through counter discourses.²⁹

The reason why particular meanings as part of the coronavirus discourse become dominant over others is related to the question of legitimacy. This refers to a process whereby the authority of a political actor or rule is accepted and abided by. In identifying the new discourse politicians gain legitimacy through their ability to 'successfully articulate, appeal, and gain acquiescence' as their discursive understandings about the coronavirus resonate with their audience.³⁰ In case of legitimacy of coronavirus policies, most governments appeal to scientific knowledge and insights, which are presented as meaningful in the fight against the coronavirus. This increases the acceptance for the policy within society. However, this is not the whole story, because in itself science cannot legitimize political decision-making. For example, the empirical evidence that social distancing helps to reduce the spread of the virus is not enough of a reason to build a policy around. If we further unpack this, we need to ask why society takes the importance of scientific knowledge and insights for granted. Scientific knowledge and insights are seen as meaningful because there is a principle at stake that justifies the political claim made on the basis of scientific evidence. In this regard, Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to the technical criterion of performativity or efficiency, that is to say, the most efficient input/output ratio.³¹ This deals with the increase of output against the decrease of

27 David Howarth, 'Power, Discourse, and Policy: Articulating a Hegemony Approach to Critical Policy Studies', *Critical Policy Studies* 3, no. 3-4 (2010): 310. In general, there is a rich discussion about what hegemony means, starting from Lenin and Gramsci to Laclau. One of the more recent insights from, for instance Laclau, is that spaces can be opened up for subjects to articulate their demands when hegemonic structures are fractured. See for further background information, David Howarth, *Discourse*, 109-111.

28 What the coronavirus crisis in The Netherlands has shown from March 2020 until March 2021 is that assumptions about the virus are not entirely taken for granted. Government intervention is seen, for instance, to be ineffective or to erode civil liberties, both linked to doubtful scientific claims, which has led to a surge in anti-lockdown protests. For example in January 2021, violent protests erupted as a reaction to the Dutch government's decision to impose a curfew, which was the first time this measure was enacted since the Second World War. At another instance, the movement *Viruswaarheid* (Virus truth) contested the imposed curfew through court and won the first installment.

29 The notion of resistance has been subject to some discussion. Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge the possibility of resistance because they argue that any domination is a continuous attempt, while Michel Foucault has more difficulty incorporating the idea of resistance by the subjects against structures of domination. As Laclau and Mouffe argue: 'Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre.' See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, 112.

30 Jack Holland, *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses after 9/11* (Routledge: London, 2013), 21.

31 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 46-47.

input. Within the coronavirus discourse, politicians claim to employ scientific insights in order to gain better results or realize less costs, and consequently, to achieve the optimalization of their performative achievements.

According to Lyotard, postmodernity can be characterized by the reduced role for philosophy in legitimizing scientific knowledge. The postmodern society displayed a crisis of narratives, because the (philosophical) narratives, including political projects such as Marxism and Liberalism, have lost their credibility to offer the cloak of legitimacy. Instead, performativity has emerged as a new legitimizing narrative. Corresponding with the informatization of society we are increasingly predisposed to think in terms of efficiency.³² Within the discourse everything is reduced to meanings of quantifiability and usefulness since information becomes a means to dominate reality. Science considerably contributes to this tendency through technological advancements, whilst it also finds legitimacy upon efficiency. On the one hand, science makes it possible to get to grips with the 'reality' of the coronavirus discourse, or in other words, the increasing control by the government. On the other hand, this increase in power is made possible by a goal-oriented and efficient investments into scientific research.³³ So through its measures and rules, the government tries to tackle the virus with the help of scientific knowledge and insights: more control equals greater output. But at the same time the government aims at the increase of scientific input, because more relevant knowledge means better control of the virus.³⁴

In this regard it is somewhat striking to find that the moral notion of solidarity, my responsibility for the other, becomes subordinate to the criterion of performativity. As part of the coronavirus discourse, solidarity is often presented as secondary and derivative to the corona policies. You are mainly in solidarity with the other by your abidance with the rules. Accordingly, it may be desirable to be concerned about the others' well-being, but it is only appropriate within the boundaries of what is permitted. The responsibility for the other receives thus a calculative or programmable content that is associated with getting the spread of the virus under control. Moral choices are combined with counting and measurements. For the coalition of politics and science the social relation is first of all an element of calculation in determining the corona policy. Repeatedly, mathematical models are employed to display the effect of particular measures. At the foreground a measuring unit which makes possible the comparison of alternatives prevails: the basic reproduction number through which the rate of transmission of an infection can be measured.³⁵ The reproduction number and solidarity are in a sense similar to communicating vessels. The quicker the virus spreads, the more politicians are legitimized to tighten the rules through which my responsibility finds its meaning. In this fashion the coronavirus discourse draws up frontiers to identify who or what

32 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 6-9, 47.

33 Compare with Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 47.

34 Compare with Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 47.

35 See also the website of the National Institute for Public Health, 'Modelling the Spread of the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2', accessed 29 March 2021, <https://www.rivm.nl/en/novel-coronavirus-COVID-19/modelling>.

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

is included or excluded: what is efficient and what is not. Some meanings become more dominant while other meanings resonate less and are even concealed. Indeed, when the coronavirus discourse is successfully articulated, the meaning of efficiency becomes natural to us by concealing how it is discursively produced. The hegemony of the input/output ratio is taken for granted.

Against this backdrop we will present an opposing view on solidarity as the welcome made to the face of the other. The welcoming of the other, my responsibility for the other as wholly other, lies at the heart of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In the following section we will attempt to explore this further. The final section tries to bring both views on solidarity together, drawing upon the thought of Derrida.

5. The face of the other

Within the coronavirus discourse the encounter with the other, the social relation, is thus mostly conceived in terms of infection risk and calculation. The other is reduced to an object subjugated to calculative reasoning. With reference to Levinas, the hegemonic coronavirus discourse reveals itself as a totality which totalizes the social relationship by limiting it to discursive meanings connected to the coronavirus. The notion of totality symbolizes here a closed whole that does not merely enclose things but also people. The philosophical works of Levinas can be characterized as a protestation against such totalization of the other, in that the other radically breaches every totality or transcends it.³⁶ The other is the absolutely other or wholly other (*tout autre*), meaning that even though he exists in relation to totality, he remains absolutely separated from it.³⁷ For Levinas, this unique alterity or otherness, is founded on the idea of infinity, which is a reference to God. The wholly other, as presented by the face,³⁸ is the trace of God. The idea of infinity, that makes the individuality of the other infinite and designates its height, cannot be captured by categories or concepts.³⁹ It resists any objectification, whereby the other escapes from the totalizing grip. In fact, the social relation is always an excess or a surplus, that is exterior to the totality, but also stands at the basis of it.

Levinas speaks in this context of a discourse prior to discourse.⁴⁰ Every impersonal or calculative discourse, such as the coronavirus discourse, implies an encounter with the other, through which one speaks face-to-face. In the living presence or epiphany of the face, the other manifests himself as an interlocutor as he comes before me and speaks to me. The other does not appear as an object or theme to be

36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 35 (5).

37 Compare Emmanuel Levinas, *Het Menselijk Gelaat*, trans. Otto de Nobel and Ad Peperzak (Bilthoven: Ambo, 1971), 110.

38 We will follow the usual translation of the French term *visage* as face.

39 This is highlighted by Levinas by capitalizing the letter 'O' when he speaks of the Other as wholly other. Since he is not consistent with its use, we will abstain from it.

40 Levinas, *Het Menselijk Gelaat*, 100.

dominated, for instance an infection risk, a corona patient or vulnerable elder, but invokes me as a person in its infinite alterity. In other words, as someone who cannot be reduced to the meanings which are attached to him as part of the totality of the coronavirus discourse. Rather than being an identity of whom one speaks, the other is the person to whom one speaks. Therefore, Levinas comments pejoratively about 'com-prehension' (*com-prendre*) of the other, connotating it with seizing (*prendre*), apprehension or taking possession.⁴¹ The other as an interlocutor is 'not a known, qualified content, apprehensible on the basis of some general idea', but is 'refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification'.⁴² The discourse between me and the other is a relationship whose terms are separated by an untraversable distance, which resists totalization, that is to say, assimilation within one common framework or system of meanings.

The discourse inscribed in the face of the other can be characterized as instruction or calling into question, also referred to as interpellation. The face of the other compels me; it puts in question my freedom.⁴³ Here comes to light the ethical dimension of infinity, that is expressed through language. The infinity which manifests itself in the face, refuses to be reduced to an object or theme and calls upon me to take on my responsibility for the other. This is quintessentially the commandment 'You shall not commit murder' to which the face of the other summons me from the start.⁴⁴ It is a commandment coming to me from the height of the other and calling upon me not to totalize the other. When the other speaks to me, meanings are created, as the nudity of the face, the vulnerability of the eyes, are hidden behind words. Consequently, I am charged with the choice to interpret the utterances of the other from the angle of totality – currently the coronavirus discourse – or to open up myself to alterity. I can reduce the other immediately to discursive meanings that are articulated in conjuncture with the coronavirus, or I can indeed listen to what the other is bringing to the fore. Since people are often encapsulated by their totality in which they find themselves, there is little to no room for welcoming the other as wholly other, as a person. This is not the same as being open to criticisms or other viewpoints, because it is fundamentally about ethical openness. That is, the recognition of the other by opening my home and possessions to him, or more precisely, by showing hospitality.⁴⁵ In the words of Christ, to whom Levinas often refers with praise: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in. I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'⁴⁶ In giving to the other, I put things into question.⁴⁷ I do not confine to my own world as if it were a castle with the gate locked, but try to give what is mine to establish community and universality.⁴⁸ Hospitality begins when the

41 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37-38 (8).

42 See Levinas, *Het Menselijk Gelaat*, 122 and *Totality and Infinity*, 73 (46).

43 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 84-85 (57-58) en *Het Menselijk Gelaat*, 148.

44 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199 (173).

45 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171-172 (146-147).

46 Matthew 25: 35-40.

47 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75 (48).

48 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76 (49).

path to the other is not blocked by labeling him in various ways, but when one is prepared to listen to the other, by opening the doors to my private domain, and lay the foundations for a common possession.⁴⁹

The fact that I can choose to open up myself to the other does not, however, mean that my responsibility for the other is predicated upon a choice. I am my brother's keeper, whether I agree or not. It is a duty that stands at the very foundation of my relationship with the other, preceding every act of will or thought.⁵⁰ For Levinas, every social relationship is at heart an ethical undertaking. In ethics, in other words, in my primary responsibility for the other, my freedom is bestowed 'investiture' or given substance in order to liberate freedom from the arbitrary.⁵¹ The face of the other questions my freedom, whereby my natural freedom is transformed into a moral freedom.⁵² Clearly, this is not about a freedom governed by general rules or principles. Levinas does not present a normative ethical theory.⁵³ The concrete manner in which I carry my responsibility cannot be dictated by general rational terms. What is deemed a fitting response to the epiphany of the face of the other, the appeal from the other, is dependent on the singularity of the situation at hand. My responsibility for the other is thus a *principium individuationis*; it demands always a unique response to the particulars within a concrete case. Figuring out what is the right thing to do is therefore a personal undertaking which I cannot sidestep by mirroring a general rule or principle. In the words of Levinas: 'The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself.'⁵⁴

This is not guided by the principle of reciprocity, because my ethical relationship with the other has an asymmetrical character. Different from symmetrical relations, such as the relationship between citizens and members of an association, my responsibility does not entail that the other is responsible: 'Reciprocity is his affair.'⁵⁵ This is related to the radical inequality between me and the other as wholly other, that makes my responsibility infinite. The other is my teacher or Master from on high, who teaches me and dominates me in his transcendence. It is up to me to answer upon the calling of the face of the infinite. I can only recognize the other insofar that I do not allow his unique alterity to be engulfed by something

49 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76 (49). See also Cees Kwant, 'De Verhouding van Mens tot Mens volgens Emmanuel Levinas', *Streven*, no. 7 (1966): 615.

50 In his later work Levinas describes the primary responsibility for the other in more radical terms as traumatism, obsession and persecution. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Kluwer, 1981).

51 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 84-85 (57).

52 Joachim Duyndam and Marcel Poorthuis, *Levinas* (Rotterdam: Lemniscat, 2003), 21-22.

53 In conversation with Derrida, Levinas notes: 'You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.' See Jacques Derrida, 'Adieu', in, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

54 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 218-219 (194).

55 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 98.

common, but open myself to the appeal that concerns me through his destitution and height.⁵⁶

It is in this welcoming of the face that equality is established.⁵⁷ This is related to the fact that ‘the third party looks at me in the eyes of the other’.⁵⁸ With the introduction of the third party, my responsibility is not merely limited to the other, but also extends to all others.⁵⁹ The notion of the third party is used by Levinas as a synonym for the whole of mankind. In the epiphany of the face the third party is ineluctable: ‘the third arrives without waiting’.⁶⁰ That means that the third party cannot be detached from the welcoming of the other, but necessarily transforms the relationship between me and the other into a ‘we’. This is how the face of the other refers to equality. Rather than explaining equality through the similarity of people or common values, equality is founded upon hospitality. In this regard Levinas speaks about the ‘phenomenon of solidarity’ which is akin to the ‘original fact of fraternity’.⁶¹ With the third party joining during the ethical encounter with the other, there is the inauguration of a brotherhood or society as my responsibility for the other is converted into a responsibility for all others. Thus, solidarity is constituted not by unity or reciprocity, but the asymmetrical responsibility for the other.

6. Solidarity and the ordeal of undecidability

As mentioned earlier, Levinas understands discourse as a face-to-face dialogue, where the other invites me to take on my responsibility. This discourse underlies the notion of discourse as a system of meanings, such as the coronavirus discourse, resembling a totality in which the other is addressed as an object or theme. Every thematization already implies the social relation as discourse and ethics. Levinas suggests that it is possible to speak to the other, without totalizing or comprehending the other in concepts. In the famous essay *Violence and metaphysics*, however, Derrida argues that it is impossible to escape from the totalizing violence in our thinking of the other. The thinking of the other necessarily brings with it that meanings are articulated. To capture the identity of the other is to attach meanings that are understandable to us, even though it pertains to the recognition of his alterity. According to Derrida, we need to accept that alterity manifests itself through language, but at the same time, we need to realize that no discourse is capable of capturing the other fully.⁶² In other words, a totality is not closed in upon itself.⁶³ As discussed, identities can never find completeness, because meanings only fill up

56 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200 (174).

57 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214 (189).

58 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213 (188).

59 See J. Aaron Simmons, ‘Levinas, Politics, and the Third Party’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 285.

60 See Jacques Derrida, ‘A Word of Welcome’, in Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 29.

61 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 214 (189).

62 Edward Barring, ‘Levinas and Derrida’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 145.

63 Compare Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 158.

momentarily through their partial fixture in the discourse. The identity of the infinite other can merely temporarily and incompletely be fixed in meanings. In this regard, Derrida poses the other as the wholly other in a different light; as an infinitude or a surplus that cannot be positioned exterior to the totality of the discourse, but is always more than what it is assumed to mean discursively.⁶⁴

This signals that even though the totalizing of the other is inevitable, we cannot succumb to it. The appeal for responsibility inscribed in the face of the other summons me to be open for the wholly other that resists totalization. My appreciation of this field of tension is what Derrida refers to as ‘the experience of the impossible’.⁶⁵ To recognize the alterity of the other, the display of solidarity, the other has to be reduced to meanings. To put it differently, if we want to do justice to a concrete case, we cannot discard the generalization and calculations of rules and principles. This is also evident within the coronavirus discourse wherein the other is articulated, for example, as an infection risk, a vulnerable elder or a coronavirus patient, in order to keep the spread of the disease in check. Without these particular meanings and rules that accompany it, my responsibility for the other cannot find any practical expression. In welcoming the face of the other, in conveying my concern for the other, I cannot avoid comprehending the alterity through normative and calculative terms. At the same time, the other becomes enclosed in a category, which insufficiently takes into account the unique situation of the other as the wholly other. In a situation of a face-to-face encounter, something incalculable and unprogrammable comes into play.⁶⁶ Something that does not allow for categorization under the heading of performativity; as an element that is subsumed under an input/output ratio.

Solidarity cannot be guaranteed by compliance to the rules. It may be legitimate or lawful to act in accordance with the rules, but that does not automatically make it solidary. Admittedly, my responsibility for the other is dependent upon rules, that is, the order of the calculable or programmable, but it cannot be deduced from it.⁶⁷ Otherwise, solidarity would remain secondary and derivative to performativity. Ultimately, the application of a rule or calculation depends upon an ethical decision that should go beyond calculative reasoning.⁶⁸ For a decision, as Derrida writes, ‘remains heterogeneous to the calculations, knowledge, science, and consciousness that nonetheless condition it’.⁶⁹ Contrary to the generality of the rules, the singularity of the situation at hand continuously asks for a *unique* interpretation. The appeal to responsibility for the other demands not merely abidance with the rules, but also the personal undertaking of continuous assumption, approval

64 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 157-158.

65 Compare Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundations of Authority”’, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

66 Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited and with a commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 17.

67 See also Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundations of Authority”’, 23.

68 Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, 19.

69 Derrida, ‘A Word of Welcome’, 116.

and confirmation of its value, by an reinstating act of interpretation.⁷⁰ In any case, it needs to be reinvented anew what the meaning of the rule is.⁷¹ For I am free to take on my responsibility in whatever sense I like. In this manner the rule is with each decision ethically founded upon solidarity.

Solidarity can therefore also be described as a paradox of dependence (calculability) and independence (beyond calculation), which appears in the moment of undecidability. An undecidable is a key term in Derrida's work, which he connects with the experience of the impossible and his problematization of dualisms.⁷² In contrast to indecisiveness or indeterminacy, undecidability is an ordeal which one needs to endure before one can speak of solidarity. An ethical decision to act in response to the appeal to responsibility requires a leap that exceeds all preparative reflections or rational calculations.⁷³ It is a leap away from the assurance of rules into the depths of the alterity of the singular situation. Similarly, Kierkegaard wrote that what we are used to call a decision does never come straight at you, but you must dare to plunge into it.⁷⁴ The decision becomes undecidable, however, because the singular situation again needs surrendering to the rules. Whenever the decision is taken, the rule is again assumed, invented, reinvented and reinstated until there is the emergence of a next singular situation.⁷⁵ This conveys that the ordeal of undecidability cannot be overcome, but haunts every decision. There is no definitive answer as to what counts as responsible. The possibility of a responsible decision comes with the endurance of the unsurmountable experience at which time I can impossibly conform to the rule as well as the situation.⁷⁶ Solidarity is neither one polarity, but is always found in the twilight between both. In this regard, solidarity functions as a critical *leitmotif* in the application of the rules. It is an incentive to improve the rules' ramifications.

What this actually means in practice can be illustrated by two examples. Think of a worst-case scenario with a shortage of ICU beds where ICU capacity is at breaking point and therefore all hospitals cannot take in new patients in need of critical care. In the event that this 'black' scenario, as Dutch commentaries refer to it, becomes reality, there is a triage protocol to allocate critical care to particular patients

70 Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', 23.

71 Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', 23.

72 See Jack Reynolds, 'Decision', in *Understanding Derrida*, ed. Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 46.

73 See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 77-78. See also Jack Reynolds and Ashley Woodward, 'Existentialism and Poststructuralism: Some Unfashionable Observations', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Felicity Joseph *et al.* (New York/London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 272.

74 'Datgene wat men beslissing pleegt te noemen komt nooit op een mens af: hij moet er zichzelf in durven begeven'. See Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard. Dagboeknotities*, ed. Wim R. Scholtens and Bernard Delfgauw (Baarn: Uitgeverij Ten Have, 1971), 50.

75 See Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', 24.

76 For a discussion about hegemony and undecidability, see Norval, 'Hegemony after Deconstruction: The Consequences of Undecidability', 147.

Thomas Jacobus de Jong & Carina van de Wetering

through general ethical guidelines and non-medical decision-making criteria.⁷⁷ The aim of the document is to provide the healthcare worker with an ethical framework to guide them along in order to get to a responsible decision in an ethically fraught situation. A responsible decision can, however, never be assured by following the guidance set out in the protocol. The doctor does not mechanically ration ICU beds on the basis of these criteria and he or she should not behave as such. The ethical decision to act according to protocol in a singular situation does not belong to the order of the programmable and calculable. When the healthcare professional is confronted with the face of the other, presenting its destitution which cries out for responsibility, he will have to decide for himself how the criteria in this singular case should be interpreted. This decision designates a leap beyond 'the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process' in order to surrender to the impossibility of the decision.⁷⁸ For it is the ordeal of undecidability whereby in each case and on the basis of a unique interpretation the compliance to the protocol is founded upon the responsibility for the other.

The second example is a real-life case that the authors came across in which solidarity serves as a critical *leitmotif* in our social relations with the other. In this example, a caregiver approached the resident of an elderly nursing home fully masked in order to give aid and assistance. This meant, however, that the caregiver was suddenly unrecognizable for the elderly resident. As a consequence, the elderly person became anxious during their encounter. In order to calm down the elder, the caregiver decided to pull down the mask to show her face and have a chat, thereby exceeding the rules and calculative meanings of fragility and high risk, and face the undecidability of the situation. Indeed, the general rules within the coronavirus discourse demand that the caregiver wears her facemask and, if possible during her task, keeps her distance. But the singularity of the situation presented by the face of the elder interrupted the caregiver's abidance by the rules, thus requiring a personal response that cannot be sidelined by any calculation or rule. Here lies the ordeal of undecidability in which the caregiver is tossed between her abidance with the rules and the singular situation of the other, without the possibility of complying to both at the same time. The only way to take responsibility is by enduring this impossible experience and reinvent the meaning of the rule. Solidarity can thus be found somewhere between the rules and the concrete case.

7. Conclusion

In this contribution we explored the meaning and scope of solidarity in a society at the mercy of a pandemic. As point of departure we employed the poststructuralist conception of discourse, as historically specific systems of meanings that form the

77 The protocol can be found here: Rijksoverheid, 'Draaiboek "Triage op basis van niet-medische overwegingen voor IC-opname ten tijde van fase 3 in de COVID-19 pandemie"', accessed 1 February 2021, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/06/16/draaiboek-triage-op-basis-van-niet-medische-overwegingen-voor-ic-opname-ten-tijde-van-fase-3-in-de-covid-19-pandemie>.

78 Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', 24.

identities of subjects and objects. Accordingly, we sought to demonstrate how the spread of the coronavirus has disrupted our relations with people and things. This also affected the way in which our responsibility for each other, solidarity, is given meaning. With the recognition of the disease as a global pandemic, former understandings of the other are not fitting anymore. A crisis discourse is formulated in which the other is identified as dangerous but also in need of protection through corona regulations. Within the coronavirus discourse solidarity is often considered as secondary and derivative to the policy-making of a coalition of politicians and scientists, thereby subjugating solidarity to the hegemony of performativity or efficiency. In other words, meanings of efficiency have become dominant and even natural to us. Based on the works of Levinas, the coronavirus discourse reveals itself as a totality in which the other is reduced to an object of calculative reasoning, hence violating the alterity of the other as wholly other. In the epiphany of the face of the other, I am summoned to take on my responsibility for the other. That is, the hospitable welcoming of the other, the recognition of his alterity, the ethical openness to the wholly other, without reducing him or her to some concept or meaning.

But as Derrida carefully pointed out, it is outright impossible not to totalize the other, because alterity manifests itself through language. Even so, the other can never be fully fixed through meanings within the coronavirus discourse. This entails that although we have to calculate and constitute rules in order to control the spread of the virus, the face of the other compels one to act responsibly in accordance with particulars of the singular situation. In this fashion solidarity can be characterized as a paradox of dependence (calculability) and independence (beyond calculation), that appears in a moment of undecidability. We cannot just abide by the rules, for that would rule out my responsibility for the irreducible alterity of the other. On the other hand, calculation and rules are unavoidable. I am therefore obliged to endure this impossible experience of undecidability, not to overcome it or merge both together, but to reinvent the meaning of the rule in each instance. This requires an ethical decision that exceeds calculation.