

Does the end justify the means? Philosopher Marli Huijer: "I don't really know what the goal is"

When asked whether the end justifies the means in the fight against corona, the professor of philosophy and former Thinker of the Fatherland pauses for a moment. "I honestly don't even know what the goal is. Are we trying to prevent the number of IC beds from filling up? Are we trying to ensure that as few people as possible become infected? Or do we want nobody to die from corona? "

We try to "smooth the curve" so that care is not overloaded, so we hope to keep the number of corona deaths as low as possible?

"But that immediately raises follow-up questions. What exactly do people die of, what is a corona death? And if people don't die now on the ICU, but from another condition in three weeks or six months - do they count?

"You actually want to know how many extra years of life you gain with the current drastic measures, but that sum can only be made years later. It may be that in 2020, not the usual 150 thousand people die, but 155 thousand. What if 145,000 people die the following year? In addition, extra years of life are also lost by postponing other treatments. I believe that the government should explicitly state what the precise aim is. Because that is, and I'll say it again, not clear now."

You are annoyed by the number of IC admissions and death rates quoted, you said at Nieuwsuur. "The public is inundated with corona numbers every day, but what do those numbers say, and how should we place them in the perspective of the fact that life has few certainties, except the irrevocable arrival of death?

"If I read that the average age of the dead is 82, what do I know? Should I mind less? We are supposed to be able to do something with such a number, but we cannot.

"First of all, every person must have the opportunity not to die prematurely. But in the end we cannot avoid that dying is part of life. It seems like we no longer accept that. We live so much longer than before, but of course it is never enough. Just that war jargon, the "battle" and "front lines" against corona. I think it is another underlying battle that we lose in advance: that against our mortality. "

The philosopher took a walk in the park with her daughter last week. At an appropriate distance, without the usual hug or touch. It is suddenly the ultimate form of parental love: their abstention from physical affection. Huijer realises that it may be easier to talk about death if you are not the party left behind. But she wonders what people would choose if they were asked manly: freedom of movement, human contact and a social life or a curtailment of those freedoms for protection? "It could be that a number would not quarantine in the trade-off between loneliness and the risk of death. Also because the measures do not guarantee that contamination will not occur. "

You were not in favour of closing the schools.

"Neither does RIVM. The closure of the schools came about under pressure, Rutte admitted frankly. I did not think that was a good move democratically. It was the appeal of the Federation of Medical Specialists that made the difference. While their focus is mainly on the micro level, on saving or healing the individual patient. They are less accustomed than RIVM epidemiologists to reflect on social issues. And once the schools are closed, you don't just turn that back. "

Why not?

"Suppose the schools reopen and the number of deaths or IC admissions increases, everyone will see a causal connection - regardless of whether it is there. While the role of children in infection may be relatively minor.

"Education is the great equaliser. In the classroom, every child gets the same opportunities. Nowadays, there are many children who do not receive education at home, because it is unsafe or too busy, because their parents have little or no education or the children do not have a laptop to participate in online lessons. That creates inequality.

"Moreover, children need other children. The social aspect is just as important - playing, running, being among group members. Quite apart from the impact that home education has on the life of parents.

"Many measures seem to stem from the idea: better to be safe than sorry. To avoid being told afterwards that you haven't done everything. The space for a different sound is therefore reduced."

What do you mean?

"It seems to me an important part of a democracy to question policies and measures. This does not work well under the time pressure that is now in place. That is a great loss. For fear of corona, we give the authorities powers that we would normally discuss extensively and that we would watch carefully in the area of privacy. "

You argue for mutiny?

'As a citizen you have to accept that there is a captain at the helm in the event of an epidemic, that is the cabinet in the Netherlands that takes decisions on the advice of RIVM, the democratically designated knowledge institute and, in times of emergency, the place where the balanced council serves. to come. You should not mutiny against the measures. But in the public debate we have to ask critical questions.

"As a public philosopher, I see it as my task to question action. Is this correct, what is the goal, who came up with this and how do we weigh different perspectives? "

Questioning the measures quickly seems inhumane. Protecting the vulnerable versus a Darwinian survival of the fittest. But it's also many vulnerable groups - physically or mentally ill, women and children in houses with violence or abuse, lonely, the poorest - who are the victims now?

"That question arises from the Kantian reasoning that we must respect and attempt to save every single life. On the other hand, you have the utilitarian point of view that you strive for the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. The doctor who does his best for the individual patient at the micro level sees it differently than the government that has to ensure the optimal distribution of scarce resources. I am a pluralist, someone who takes as many perspectives into consideration as possible.

And who therefore asks questions such as: do you give priority to people with corona or to people with other serious conditions?

"Six weeks may not be long for me, but what if you have a mental disorder and are now unable to get help, or if you have been left at home with a seriously handicapped child whose day structure and care has disappeared?

"When all this is over, there will be a parliamentary inquiry to evaluate the chosen strategies. This will mainly be done in health and economic terms. But how do you weigh the artist who was going to experience the peak of his career in the theater just in these months and who may have been cracked in his career, the discontinued music companies, the bankrupt bookstores. What does it do to us culturally?

"And what does such a period of social distancing affect the sense of community? The tricky thing about a virus is that it also carries a kind of enemy thinking. It is your fellow men who threaten your health. What will it do in the long run if so much mistrust of society creeps in? "

Many people are shocked by the idea that we will live in a world with a distance of one and a half meters for a long time to come. How do you see that?

"I am frankly happy with the word 'one and a half meter economy', because it is so clear, and I notice in the city how people are able to give it a creative interpretation. I think it is a good strategy to return step by step to the old situation.

"But we are such thoroughly physical beings, you won't last that long, we will be driven together again. Hopefully it can be lifted more quickly for people under the age of 20, as it is becoming increasingly clear that this group is less comprehensible and not seriously ill - because

adolescents and children, who have to touch, are their whole life energy. I have already been touched so much, I can do with a little less for a while. "

You want to hear more critical voices in the public domain. You are such a voice, but you mainly ask questions. Are there any answers?

"It is not up to the philosopher to give the answers, but to overturn apparent obviousness. It is up to the government to say what the trade-offs are and what the precise purpose of quarantine measures, testing and chosen medical treatments is. In addition, I advise older people to have a conversation with friends or children about what is a good death. "

If you could now give advice to the cabinet, what would you say?

"Reduce the focus on mortality rates. Realise that what cannot be expressed in numbers, such as the social, cultural, psychological and political consequences, is equally important. Come up with creative solutions to keep your distance and wash your hands, but be cautious about containment and surveillance measures. And accept that people end up dying somewhere, no matter how far we extend life expectancy. "