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COVID-19 and Beyond: The Need for Copathy and Impartial Advisers

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Abstract

When humanity has either suppressed coronavirus disease 2019 or learned to come to terms with its continued existence, governments and corporations probably return to their prepandemic stances. Solutions to the world's problems are sought from technology and business innovations, not from considerations of equality and well-being for all. This is in stark contrast with the pandemic-time situation. Many governments, at least initially, listened to the recommendations of expert advisers, most notably public health authorities, who proceeded from considerations of equality and common good. I suggest that we should continue on this path when the immediate threat of the disease is over. Other crises are already ongoing—poverty, conflicts, climate change, financial bubbles, and so on—and it would be good to use expert knowledge rather than interests and ideologies in dealing with them. To assist in this, I outline the characteristics of a new kind of counsellor, *impartial adviser*, who is normatively motivated by a sense of *copathy* and who takes into account all views, nice and not-so-nice alike. I illustrate the nature and ideological orientation of copathic impartial advisers by placing them on a map of justice and examining their relationships with the main political moralities of our time.

Keywords: impartial; justice; advisers; copathy; sympathy

Dealing with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has raised questions concerning the proper use of moral and political theories in public decisions,¹ their justification,² and their communication.³ But what about after the pandemic is over, or we have learned to live with it? What role should views on justice and morality have in the rebuilding of economies and preparation for new crises? Should we accept and develop the health utilitarian approach that worked relatively well in some countries during the early confinement of COVID-19?⁴ Or should we turn away from its monomaniac obsession for health and normalcy,^{5,6,7} its discriminating operationalizations,^{8,9,10} and its blatant paternalism?¹¹

I suggest that we take a wider look at political moralities and try to define what qualities governmental and regional *advisers* should have to best serve societies. Politicians have their own partisan views and act from many motives, but those who counsel them could—and, I argue, should—rise above ideological disagreements and be *impartial*. Impartiality, however, is not a straightforward matter, and not the sole property of health utilitarians, although they, too, can claim a version of it. Furthermore, impartiality is not a middle or compromise view, tempting as the idea might seem. Taken to its logical conclusion, it is an extreme attitude and outlook, which excludes many other ways of thinking.

In what follows, I will first introduce a map of justice, which shows the similarities and differences of some main ideologies, or political moralities. This gives me a tool to predict where economies and societies will be directed after the pandemic is somehow in control. I will then go on to locate impartiality on the map, and describe the attitude, *copathy*, that would be the most natural mindset for impartial advisers. This takes a departure from health utilitarianism, retaining, however, the commitment to universal altruism that utilitarianism traditionally embraces. Other popular theories of justice do not

share this commitment, but I will conclude by outlining how their best elements, too, could be consolidated with copathy as the ideal mentality of impartial advisers.

Political Moralities, Their Similarities, and Their Differences

Most people agree that the core of justice is equality. We should treat one another with equal consideration and respect, everybody who counts should count for one and no one should count for more than one, and all those affected by decisions should be heard, or at least accounted for, in making them. Beyond these relatively well-accepted tenets, however, interpretations on who or what counts and how they should be considered and why vary considerably.

In my map of justice,¹² I distinguish three main dimensions, namely the private versus public control of means of production, local versus global interests, and positional versus universal norms and values. When these are set as opposites, the theories that appear on the map are libertarianism versus socialism, communitarianism versus utilitarianism, and care and identity ethics versus the capabilities approach. **Figure 1** presents these variables and doctrines and their locations on the map of justice schematically.

The theories of justice placed on the map in **Figure 1** have some surprising differences and similarities (I have described their main features elsewhere).¹³

The bottom left corner represents positional thinking, according to which values, norms, rights, and duties can vary between different groups. It is, for instance, the mother’s role to care for her children, but the children do not, at least for a long time, have a similar responsibility for the mother.¹⁴ Identity politics that focus on gender, sexuality, and relation to colonialism belong to the same corner. Their aim is the recognition of oppressed groups that have not been recognized before.¹⁵ This view is in sharp contrast with communitarian nationalism just above it on the map, which is interesting, because they both emphasize identity. On the other hand, parochial nationalism is also shunned by more liberal communitarians, although they both share the belief in the importance of spontaneously formed traditions.^{16,17}

When nationalists join forces with libertarians, the result is the 2017–2021 regime in the United States, somewhere outside the top left corner of my map, if we scale it for reasonably predictable governments. But more moderate libertarians can also form an alliance with utilitarianism. The doctrine of classical liberalism taught, and early heralds of corporate social responsibility thinking and their critics reiterated, that businesses producing a return to their stockholders eventually benefit entire societies by their apparently self-serving behavior.^{18,19} Socialism at the bottom of **Figure 1** deserves its place as an adversary of libertarianism,^{20,21} although in political reality the space is perhaps currently occupied by a Chinese-type state capitalism as the opposite number of corporate capitalism.

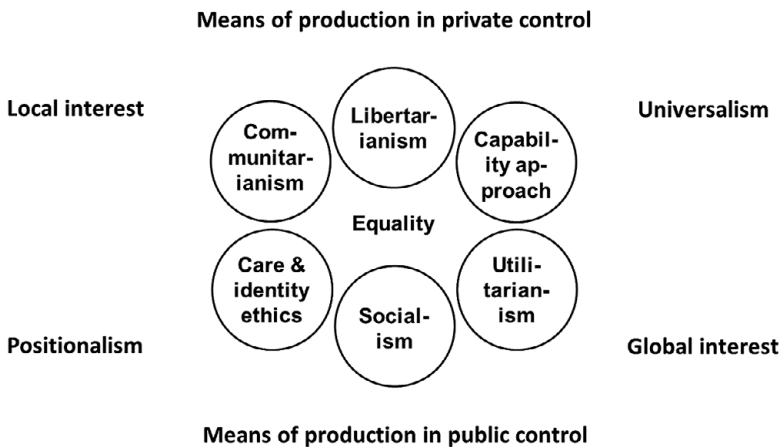


Figure 1. Political moralities on a map of justice.

Feminist thinking overcomes the division between positionalism and universalism with remarkable ease. Capability theorists are at home with second-wave or liberal feminism and see women and men sufficiently similar to warrant equal rights and opportunities for both.²² In the care and identity corner, a more natural fit is intersectional feminism, which stresses differences and the recognition of oppressed groups as themselves, not as reflections of a shared, neutral human essence (which in political practice tends to be abled-white-male-shaped).²³ Collaboration between these is clearly possible, although their presuppositions concerning human nature are so wide apart. This presents something of a puzzle.

Compromises and the Direction of Global Capitalism

The center of **Figure 1** has two main interpretations. It can be a place of either theoretical or practical compromises.

Theoretically, philosophers have suggested models that combine the strengths of the extremes while excluding their weaknesses. John Rawls with his theory of justice as fairness offered a quasi-contractual account which is neither libertarian nor socialist, communitarian nor utilitarian, although nods are made into all directions. The premises include individual freedom, a modicum of material equality, a sense of justice with a community ring to it, and strong leanings toward wellbeing in societies, as also desired by the (officially rejected) utilitarians.^{24,25,26} The rational decisionmaker behind the veil of ignorance is the key to justifying the Rawlsian arrangement.

There are, however, other contenders. Jürgen Habermas, in his communicative-action founded and deliberative-democracy advocating view,^{27,28,29} positioned himself in the middle by developing further the general-will and universal-reason informed views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau³⁰ and Immanuel Kant.³¹ Nondominated public discourse is the pivotal approach here, although lapses into a universally shared rationality occur both generally³² and in particular issues.³³ Martha Nussbaum's version of the capability approach apparently contains traces of Aristotelian, feminist, liberal, Marxist, and natural law ethics.^{34,35,36} In a recent development, the idea of liberal utilitarianism as a middle view has also been presented³⁷ and discussed.^{38,39}

The practical reading of the center of **Figure 1** starts with the observation that the six opposing and allying views of justice all give their own interpretations of equality, and in a sense leave the midpoint empty. The space is then occupied by real-life political compromises: parties, coalitions, and governments. Rawls's, Habermas's, and Nussbaum's doctrines are here best seen as intuitive academic approximations of realpolitik. **Figure 2** presents the general situation in most liberal democracies on the map of justice.⁴⁰

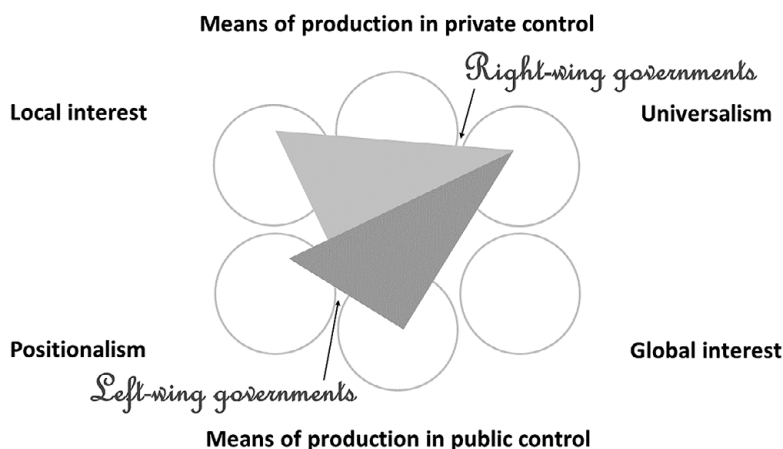


Figure 2. Party political coalitions in liberal democracies on a map of justice.

The upper triangle represents right-wing parties, coalitions, and governments, whose economics lean toward libertarianism and whose values can be conservative or liberal but not diverse in the sense of care-and-identity ethics or radical as in utilitarianism. The lower triangle stands for left-wing and green parties, coalitions, and governments, whose economics are more socialist or social democratic and whose values can range from diverse to liberal but do not stray into the conservative or radical corners.

In liberal and social democracies with coalition governments, political parties are often in practice almost indistinguishable in the middle (although the distinction depicted in Figure 2 is loosely based on the Finnish regimes of 2015–2019 and 2019–). Decisions are made and agreements sealed based on interests more than ideologies. The differences, difficult to determine precisely, are not, however, my main point here. The more intriguing detail is the arrow that the right- and left-wing governments form toward universalism and (via the capability approach and its allies) toward primarily technological and business solutions to the world's problems. It forms the basis of my prediction of developments after the immediate impact of COVID-19 has been dealt with in one way or another.

During the initial confinement period of the pandemic in spring 2020, governments could, if they so decided, hide behind the health utilitarian arguments provided by epidemiologists and other public health scientists (see notes 3 and 4). In the height of a healthcare crisis, it is natural to concentrate on health and put other considerations momentarily on hold. But eventually authorities have to make choices concerning other values as well—economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental, to name a few.

Are we then, after the situation has settled down sufficiently, going to turn the prepandemic globalization progress on its head and go for the happiness of the greatest number within and across borders, forgoing our group and national interests? This is highly unlikely, because if parties promised to do anything like that, many could lose their voters (“party”, after all, implies that parts are taken). Or do we go for genuine nationalism, close our borders, and forget about globalization? There are attractions (more sustainable food production, attention to local values, less vulnerability in production chains) and threats (parochialism, setbacks to international collaboration on human rights and climate issues) in this approach, and some governments may be considering its advantages. Since, however, the world is run by multinational business corporations at least as much as by local governments, this, too, is unlikely.

The remaining alternative, easy to adopt, is to return to the prepandemic approach and follow the Enlightenment path to further globalization, technological advances, consumerism, and continued material growth. This is not necessarily a good choice nor one that would be recommended by impartial advisers.

Global Capitalism in a Nutshell or Why More of the Same May Not Be the Answer

Capitalism is an economic and political system that makes some people happy and others unhappy. The doctrine of classical liberalism taught that its driving force is growth. When populations and economies grow, more and more people will be happy, maybe at some point even the majority. Karl Marx believed that capitalism is such a strong force that it will make everyone happy, in a consumerist kind of way, before it meets the limits of technology and nature, after which the only resource to exploit is the workforce. It will be exploited, because the system cannot survive without perpetual growth, and alienation, class struggle, and revolution will ensue. Or that is how the story goes.⁴¹

Time ran out on Marx's prediction, though, as capitalism met other, environmental boundaries. One early warning was given by the Great Horse Manure Crisis of London. In 1894, *The Times* announced that since horse droppings can be carted out of big cities only by horses, producing more droppings, “in 50 years, every street in London will be buried under nine feet of manure.”⁴² Although this threat was averted by the invention and increased use of motorcars, gasoline, and oil, the solution brought us, in time, something even more alarming, namely climate change. And although some say that “sustainable development” will be a remedy to this,⁴³ it is more than feasible that it is not, and that some people, even some currently “happy” ones, will be left in or thrown into the external darkness, so to speak.⁴⁴

Technological and business solutions to the climate and other issues continue to be paraded, and they will be the way chosen by corporations and governments in the aftermath of the acute COVID-19 crisis. That is the way that liberal democracies are developing, and the only alternative seems to be nationalism or some other type of parochialism. The problem here is the pattern. Technologies and businesses, under the auspices of corporate (Western) and state (China) global capitalism, create crises, the crises are solved by more of the same, and more crises are produced. Is there any way to break the pattern? As a philosophical ethicist, I can only suggest that governments should seek better advice to allow us to get out of this vicious circle.

Impartial Advisers, Sympathy, and Copathy

The better advice by almost impartial advisers during the early confinement of COVID-19 came, where they were heard, from national institutes of public health. After the pandemic has been suppressed or otherwise dealt with, we still face other global crises: poverty, conflicts, climate, and the exploitation of human, animal, and other natural resources. Could we have similar national or international institutes for those? The institute of equal wellbeing? The institute of taking the climate change seriously? This may not happen, because a clear and present threat to us seems to be the only good motivator, and we do not perceive climate change as “clear and present” or poverty as a threat to “us” (say, the middle classes of liberal democracies). Impartial advisers might, though. Figure 3 outlines the background.

So, although everyone believes in some sense in the importance of equality, different values and beliefs draw interpretations into diverse directions. The distinction that is relevant to my present narrative sets apart the ideologies of the upper left and the lower right halves of the map in Figure 3. Impartial advisers inhabit the lower right.

On the left, intrinsic values include spontaneous communality, immaterial values, collectivism, and divides between groups or sections of people. On the right, the commitment is to the similar moral standing of all people (and maybe other sentient beings), autonomous choices by individuals, measurable goods, and the meticulous calculation and weighing of these goods as the basis of public decisions. The emphasis on private property or particular communities and sections renders the upper left side slightly egoistic. On the lower right, altruism has a firmer grip, as the creeds there stress universal inclusion, social

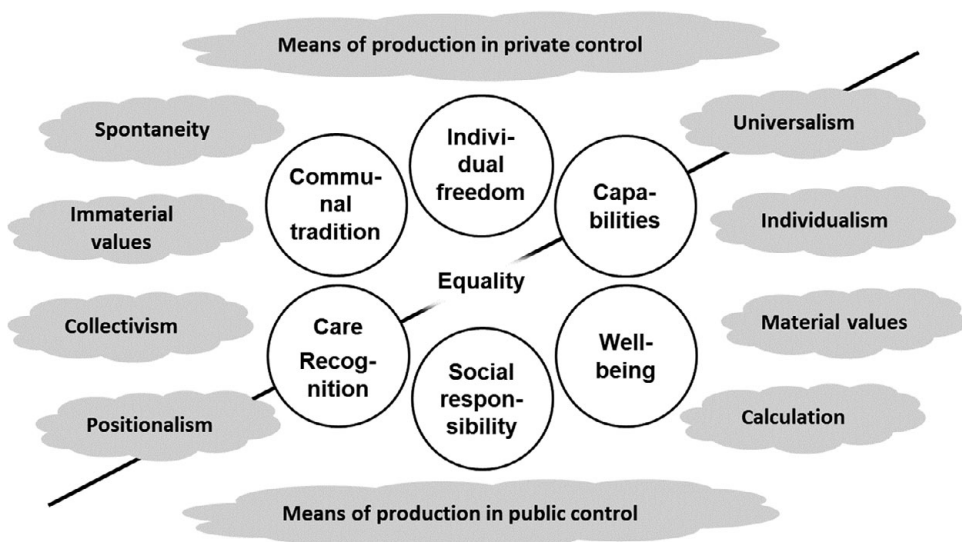


Figure 3. Values and beliefs on a map of justice.

responsibility, and equality of opportunity for all. The egoism-altruism distinction is not, however, either exact or rigid.

In considering the nature of our moral sense (something that I am circling in my quest for impartial advisers), Shaftesbury, in the eighteenth century, already wrote about the difference between egoism and altruism, “The Question wou’d not be, ‘Who *lov’d* himself, or Who *not*’; but Who *lov’d* and *serv’d* himself the *rightest*, and after the truest manner?”⁴⁵ By saying this, he noted that the boundaries between ourselves and others are not so clear that anybody could optimally further their interests by completely disregarding others. Even universal happiness, or the happiness of the greatest possible number, can be a good (mediate) goal for us, and to admit this we need not be that keen on the wellbeing of others (as such).

Shaftesbury’s historico-philosophical context provides a further clue to finding the location of impartial observers on the map of justice. Most moral sense theorists assigned *sympathy* or some similar feeling the pride of place in their ethical doctrines. The values and beliefs that characterize different accounts of justice, depicted in Figure 3, help to detect which accounts would accept the idea of impartial advisers and which ones not. The situation, as I see it, is presented in Figure 4.

The mode of “feeling together” in the upper left half of the figure is selective solidarity (see note 1). Nationalists sympathize with members of their nations; oppressed groups with their oppressed group members; and champions of private property with fellow champions of private property. All these can employ counsellors who promote the specific interests of the chosen group or section, but they would not normally hire advisers who would place the good of others before theirs. Restrictive health guidance can be accepted during health crises, but when it comes to prohibitions or the redistribution of property to ease the plight of strangers or to avert climate change and other such catastrophes similar logic does not apply.

Moving on to the interface between the two ideological constellations, some care ethicists, some supporters of identity politics, and some capability thinkers can support impartial advisers, others cannot. This is a question of motivation, or the interpretation of the principle of “sympathy” in the middle of Figure 4. Those forms of identity politics that draw their strength from hatred toward other groups would probably not be amenable to impartial advice. Taking into account the objects of their hatred would not tally well with the rest of their views (see note 1). The same goes for those forms of capability ethics that gain their motivation from disdain. By this I mean a (perhaps unconscious) resentment toward people who choose to live in their oppressed but perhaps moderately comfortable state instead of exposing themselves to the dangers of more liberating routes.

This leaves three forms of sympathy to support impartial advisers. Some branches of care ethics contribute to the equation the kind of fellow feeling that can be described as loving the broken, the

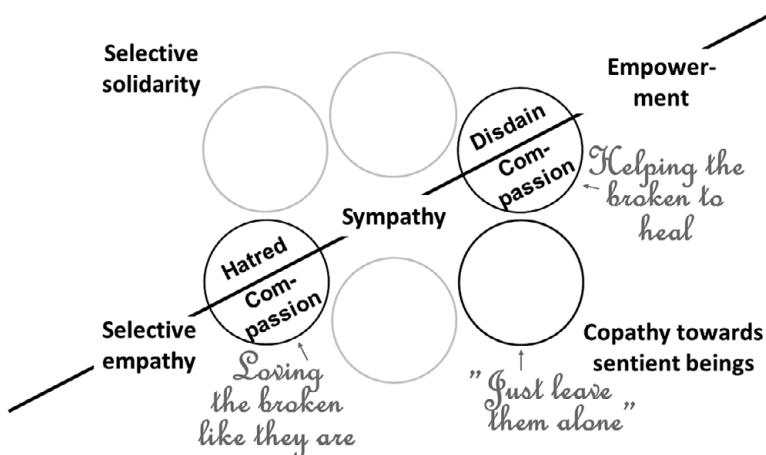


Figure 4. Forms of sympathy on a map of justice.

dependent, or the ones seeking their place as they are. The capability approach adds compassion that aims at making the broken, the dependent, and the ones seeking their place intact, independent, and at home with their surroundings.

From the utilitarian corner comes an attitude that has not had a name before but could be coined *copathy*. By this I mean a universal together feeling that does not involve connections to guilt, shame, pity, love, hatred, or any other stronger feelings like them. Copathy would be a calm sensation or realization that we are one with all other sentient beings, and that we should not by our actions or choices make their lot worse. With its allies based on the feeling of sympathy, it could recommend, for instance, climate action at the expense of our own momentary comfort (see note 37) or the abolition of the use of sentient nonhuman animals in industrial food production.⁴⁶ This is the attitude that my suggested counselors should have.

Rescuing Some Values, Rejecting Others, and Accepting Responsibility for the Residue

The history of philosophy knows many entities that resemble my sketched copathic advisers. David Hume and Adam Smith's impartial observer and judicious spectator, Immanuel Kant's rational agent, Sigmund Freud's superego, John Rawls's individual behind the veil of ignorance, R. M. Hare's archangel, and Ronald Dworkin's judge Hercules are well-known examples.⁴⁷ These are all decisionmakers who do not allow their emotions, personalities, or short-term self-interests get in the way of their judgment.

In real life, political advisers are different. On the lower right half of Figure 4, we can find care-oriented, development-oriented, calculating, and common-good-driven counsellors. They are all potential allies of the copathic impartial adviser, but there are certain caveats.

The natural place for my advisers on the map of justice in Figure 4 is in the utilitarian corner. This is also inhabited by health utilitarians. Their approach is impeccable in its impartiality when it comes to individuals and groups. It is, however, committed to one value, health, at the expense of all others, and hence axiologically partial. Similar considerations can be extended to care, development, and calculation ethicists, as well. They prioritize one value dimension at the expense of others, and this is not impartial enough for my vision. It leads to a situation in which the common good, an admirable aim when thought about abstractly, assumes concrete content that defies the idea of taking everybody into account.⁴⁸

On the upper left half of Figure 4 counsellors put their own agendas first. In that section, we can find business lobbyists, neoliberal think tanks, nationalist or ethnic advisory groups, and gender and related organizations. These are not impartial at all and cannot be allowed to reign in a copathic world. But whatever they have to say must still be heard, just like the voices of the counsellors closer to my impartial advisers. It is a question of filtering the detrimental elements out and keeping the partisan but not harmful constituents.⁴⁹ Impartial advisers should not let rashness, greed, racism, or gender rage influence their recommendations, but they should consider the points of view of legitimate risk taking, self-interest, national, or ethnic pride, and concern for the oppression of one's reference group. The task is difficult, but it is what genuine impartiality would require.

Another challenge would be to avoid the biases reflected in the historico-philosophical models. Hume and Smith's image is that of a country squire sipping sherry in front of a fire; Kant's a highly virtuous rational man; Freud's an internalized watchdog for societal norms; Rawls's a male head of family on the Mayflower; Hare's an impossibly knowledgeable archangel (in the Christian scriptures they are all men); and Dworkin's an equally omniscient jurist called Hercules. As a result, the bias is toward male, norm-loving, law-abiding, prudentially self-interested, patriarchal know-it-alls who never err.

There are two main lessons to be learned from the qualities of the better-known contenders. The first is that we cannot hide our embodiment from the equation. The concept of copathy almost implies that impartial advisers could be noncorporeal (theological angels with no dimensions, moved only by their intellectual irritation instead of emotion), but of course they cannot. In the further development of the model, I will have to address this. The second is that assuming omniscience is all good and fine with theoretical models, but if impartial advisers are meant to be real people, the possibility of mistakes has to be admitted. This leads to my final consideration here, namely *moral residue*.

From time to time, all public decisionmakers make wrong decisions and all advisers, partial or impartial, give bad advice. When this happens, the solution is not to sack them at once, although it may seem tempting—send the right message, respond firmly, and so on. In the case of politicians, elections often lead to that result, for better and for worse. But if expert advisers admit their mistakes *and* take responsibility for the moral residue *and* we have grounds to believe that they have learned from their mistakes, it would in many cases be suboptimal to get rid of their services. They may still be the best experts in their fields and replacing them with less knowledgeable counsellors would not be wise.

The Public Health Agency of Sweden and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic during spring 2020 is a case in point. Based on the Agency's work, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell publicly professed, day in and day out for months, his faith in the lighter restrictions the country had chosen.⁵⁰ He did not, however, ignore the challenges of the approach. He admitted relatively early on that the strategy had caused an unacceptable amount of deaths,⁵¹ and although he continued to defend the Agency's approach,⁵² he also later conceded that with the knowledge they had a few months after the pandemic had hit Sweden, they would probably have given different recommendations.⁵³ There is every reason to believe that this realization made a mark on the Agency's mindset. The officials did feel the fallout of their counsel and in some sense accepted responsibility for it.

For my suggested copathic impartial advisers, the responsibilities would be even wider and deeper. The Swedish health utilitarian counsellors “only” had to worry about morbidity and mortality. Truly impartial advisers would also have to answer for other values and the indirect consequences of their instructions. Impartiality, as I announced in the beginning of this article, is an extreme view, against all other views. Can we concentrate on health? No, because there are other considerations. Can we concentrate on economy? No, because there are other considerations. Can we concentrate on care? No, because there are other considerations. And so on. We cannot even focus only on considerations that seem good, nice, kind, and reasonable, because there are bad, unpleasant, cruel, and senseless considerations that we have to take into account. Why? Because strict impartiality requires us to do so. If that is too much to ask, my proposal can be unacceptable. Be that as it may, I stand by my words and say that the world would be a better place with impartial advisers, motivated by copathy, and willing to absorb all the moral residue that follows from listening to their counsel.

Acknowledgments. My thanks are due, for financial support, to the Academy of Finland (project SA 307467 “Bioeconomy and Justice”) and the Finnish Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry (projects 101/03.02.06.00/2018 “The Role of Justice in Decision Making Concerning Bioeconomy” and 2142/03.02.06.00/2018 “A Just Management Model for a Systemic and Sustainable Shift Towards Bioeconomy”). My thanks are also due to Dr Henrik Rydenfelt, with whom I have fruitfully discussed many aspects of this article.

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