

Let's stop talking about human life versus the economy

Much is being written at the moment about the trade-offs Covid-19 is requiring us to make. For some, the trade-off is between human life and something that is not human life. That something, they say, is *the economy*.

We want to call time on the human life versus economy distinction. We think it is getting in the way of clear thinking about the pandemic and the choices it presents. But before we can drop the distinction, we need to understand what it is seeking to capture and the unease it is seeking to express. That is the purpose of this article.

There are different levels at which concerns about human life and concerns about the economy might be seen as pulling in different directions. At the most abstract level stands the thought that human life and the economy occupy different realms of value. On this view, human life has intrinsic value: we value human life as an end in itself. In contrast, whatever value the economy has, it is not intrinsic value: either it just has no value at all or the value it has is a means to some other end (say, human well-being).

Viewed in this way, the trade-off is between human life and the economy is really a trade-off between different kinds of value, value that is intrinsic and value that is not. From here, a further step is made: something that has intrinsic value (human life) should always trump something that does not have intrinsic value (the economy). Put another way, the economy is about producing *things* but things are not people and should never count for more than them.

We can look at this in a less rarified way and still come to the same conclusion. If you were on a date with someone who argued that there is a price on human life and that there is a point at which that price simply becomes too much, you would probably make your excuses and leave. The idea of allowing someone to die to save on the cost of keeping them alive offends something very deep in us.

And yet these arguments are not all that they seem. First, the means-end distinction is difficult to maintain in framing the trade-off as one between the value we attach to human life and the value we attach to the economy. Food and shelter are not just a means to human life, they are essential to it. Without the means, there is no end. The idea one can make a trade-off between things and life and still end up with life, come what may, makes no sense.

The second argument is more bread-and-butter. The belief that there is a price on human life, reprehensible as it may seem, would not come as news to policy-makers in HM Treasury. Putting a price on human life is how they set the NHS budget each year. The Treasury does not say to the NHS *money is no object, save all the lives you can*. If it did, national economic

planning would become impossible and the NHS would devour the spending of all other government departments.

Part of the problem here may be that we do not have a handle on the kind of thing the economy *is*. One way to think of it is as an aggregation of human *activity*, directed towards a noble and not-so-noble ends alike. This aggregation includes the activity of saving lives itself, in all the different ways we are seeing this takes place, from medical care to drug manufacture to deep-cleaning. You could say that the NHS *is* the economy or at least an important part of it. No-one suggests we have to choose between saving lives and the NHS.

So, when people talk about the trade-off between human life and the economy, they cannot be referring to the part of the economy that is about keeping people alive. They must be referring to the part of the economy that appears to them peripheral to this task – the part, as they would see it, that is about money-making, pure and simple.

But this would suggest that there is no cost, in terms of human life, in letting (even) those parts of the economy go by the wayside. This is false. Consider the *direct* costs. We know that unemployment has an effect on mortality just as we know that recessions shorten lifespan. An economic depression would, in itself, cost many more lives.

And then there are the *indirect* costs of allowing a part of the economy to tank. The NHS cannot print its own money. Its capacity to save life is a function of the level of national tax revenue it can draw on and from which it pays its own bills. The smaller the pot of national revenue, the more limited the (actual or potential) capacity of the NHS. From here, it is a short step to the idea that even areas of the economy that appear morally trivial in themselves perform a valuable function in helping to prop up the morally weighty parts of the economy. HMRC is not picky about the moral worthiness of the sources of its revenue: tax dollars can always be put to good use, wherever they come from.

So, human life requires an economy and an economy requires human life. Within this relation there are complexities about means and ends and about how far morally trivial activities can serve morally weighty goals. There are also some sober truths about how we *already* ration the quantity of some human life (even when economic times are good) often in the name of promoting the quantity and quality of other human life. The economy may be the *medium* through which these judgements are transmitted but it does no justice to the deep questions raised by the Covid-19 crisis to try to package them in the human life *versus* economy distinction. It is time to move the debate on.