# The meaning of masks

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**Abstract**

Many incentives are monetary, and when private or public institutions seek to change behavior, it is natural to change monetary incentives. But many other incentives are a product of **social meanings**, about which people may not much deliberate, but which can operate as subsidies or as taxes. In some times and places, for example, the social meaning of smoking has been positive, increasing the incentive to smoke; in other times and places, it has been negative, and thus served to reduce smoking. With respect to safety and health, including the wearing of masks to avoid health risks, social meanings change radically over time, and they can be dramatically different in one place from what they are in another. Often people live in accordance with meanings that they deplore, or at least wish were otherwise. But it is exceptionally difficult for individuals to alter meanings on their own. Alteration of meanings can come from law, which may, through a mandate, transform the meaning of action into a bland, "I comply with law," or into a less bland, "I am a good citizen." Alteration of social meanings can also come from large-scale private action, engineered or promoted by "meaning entrepreneurs," who can turn the meaning of action from, "I am an oddball," to, "I do my civic duty," or, "I protect others from harm." Sometimes subgroups rebel against new or altered meanings, produced by law or meaning entrepreneurs, but often those meanings stick and produce significant change.

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In late March of 2020, President Donald Trump announced that his administration was recommending that in public settings, all Americans should be wearing masks, or face coverings, to protect against the spread of coronavirus (CDC, 2020). At the same time, he said that he personally would not follow that recommendation. As he put it, "Wearing a face mask as I greet presidents, prime ministers, dictators, kings, queens – I just don't see it" (Martin, 2020). But why didn't President Trump "see it"? To answer that question, let us ask another one. Suppose that you pass a neighbor on the street or in a grocery store and that he is wearing a mask. If so, what do you think?

Here are seven possibilities:

(1) He has coronavirus.

(2) He is far more frightened than he should be.

(3) He looks peculiar.

(4) He is an anti-social, selfish person who does not want to be infected by others, even though the probability is very remote.

(5) He is being prudent.

(6) He is simply following the government's recent recommendations.

(7) He is protecting other people from a risk that he might be imposing on them.

With respect to masks, social norms vary across and within nations. But in many times and places, those who wear masks produce reactions (1), (2), (3), or (4). It seems clear that if people know that if they wear masks, they will produce such reactions, they will be less likely to wear masks, even if they also believe that wearing marks is a sensible thing to do. Their decision will be a product of a rough calculation of the benefits of wearing masks (to self and perhaps others) and the costs of the negative reactions that wearing masks will produce. The "spotlight effect" might well intensify people's sense that other people will react to what they do. If people exaggerate the likelihood that other people will notice their actions, and care about them, the expected judgments and reactions of others might loom quite large in their calculation.

In the same vein, people might not decline to eat meat, even if that is what they would otherwise prefer to do, if declining to eat meat would produce a loud and unwanted social signal. As Red Auerbach, the great American basketball coach, frequently said, "It's not what you say; it's what they hear." And if people know what "they" will hear, their statements and actions might shift dramatically.

The larger point is that people's actions have "social meanings," which operate as the equivalent of subsidies or taxes on

behavior (Lessig, 1995).[1] Social meanings create incentives, sometimes small and sometimes large. Meanings are an artifact of social norms, which may serve a variety of functions, good or bad.[2] We might not know where such norms come from; the act of historical excavation might be extremely challenging. But we might know what functions norms serve, and those functions might be highly desirable. They create meanings, positive or negative.

If, for example, one cuts in line at a grocery, the social meaning is roughly, "I am a selfish person, and I do not care about other people." Because that is the social meaning of cutting in line, people are far less likely to cut in line (Ullmann-Margalit, 2017). Some preliminary evidence suggests that with respect to pandemics, people are more affected by the idea that precautionary measures will stop them from spreading the disease to others than by the idea that such measures will decrease their personal risks (Jordan, 2020). In most times and places, if the social meaning of action is, "I do not care about you," or, "I do not care about imposing health risks on you," people will become less likely to engage in that action.

With respect to safety and health, social meanings can have a massive effect on outcomes. Consider norms against violence and meanings that encourage forbearance. The idea that "I will not hurt you, so long as you do not hurt me" can solve a prisoner's dilemma; in fact it does so every day (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977). For new threats, old meanings might not be sufficient. Norms against air pollution, and new meanings associated with polluting, are cases in point. In the context of a pandemic, the meanings of action can shift dramatically. That might be necessary to save lives. Old meanings are literally dangerous.

Social meanings are everywhere, and they greatly influence what people do, even if they are taken as part of life's furniture, and even if people do not much think about their impact. If you buckled your seatbelt a few decades ago, the driver might have heard you to say: "You are a terrible driver, and I am terrified that we are going to crash." If you lit up a cigarette in an office meeting in, say, 1965, you might have been perceived as cool, or as sexy, or simply as normal. If you declined to eat meat at a dinner party in, say, January of this year, you might have seemed peculiar, depending on the prevailing norms.

Social meanings often lead people to engage in behavior, or to decline to engage in behavior, against what would otherwise be their wishes. If the meaning of drinking beer at an office party is joining the fun, people might agree to drink beer, even if people hate beer. When people are not in the midst of a pandemic, they might want to telecommute on occasion, perhaps because they have childcare obligations. Perhaps they will succeed in getting their employer's permission to do that. But if the meaning of telecommuting is that people are

not really dedicated to their work, and are not giving it high priority, they might decide to go into the office.

Because of the power of social meanings, statements and actions often signal certain virtues or vices, or offer a statement of social identity, a sense of the tribe to which one belongs. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, getting very close to other customers in a grocery store had, in many places, a clear social meaning: "I don't care about your health." For Jews, wearing a yarmulke is of course a statement of affiliation, and its valence will be different among different groups. A few decades ago, the meaning of calling women "Miss" or "Mrs." shifted abruptly, and those who used those terms, or instead "Ms.," offered certain social signals (often but not always intended). In American universities, calling students "Mr." or "Ms." recently came to have a new social meaning, because many people thought that doing that had naïve or offensive connotations with respect to gender identity. When people speak or act in certain ways, it might be because the social meaning is like a tax or a subsidy, not in general, but with the particular groups or community that most matters to them.

In these respects, social meanings can operate as substitutes for economic incentives or instead as complements; they can also push in competing directions. Rather than taxing or fining people for (say) smoking cigarettes, private and public institutions might try to stigmatize smoking, and enlist a new or altered social meaning. For example, they might try to make smoking signal "indifference to the health of others." Alternatively, a cigarette tax might accompany a social meaning tax. Or a penalty or fine (on, say, the use of illegal drugs) might have to compete with a social meaning subsidy, in places where the use of illegal drugs signals independence and defiance of authority (in a way that relevant people admire).

We should distinguish here between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. I am emphasizing that social meanings create an extrinsic motivation: People do not want to incur the opprobrium, or even the raised eyebrows, of others. In the standard cases, social meanings affect behavior even if the agent would be perfectly content or even eager to act in the way that they disincentivize. But social meanings can also get under people's skin, and so affect intrinsic motivation, certainly in the long-term and possibly in the short-term. If littering is generally deemed to be an uncivil or inconsiderate act, or worse than that, potential litterers might internalize that judgment. If flirting with a subordinate has the social meaning of discriminating against or using people, then employers might not want to flirt with subordinates. The social meaning of action can and often does influence people's own judgments about what is right or acceptable to do.

Importantly, social meanings change over time. Old novels, old plays, and old movies are sometimes jarring or worse, because they now contain meanings that they did not contain when originally released. Often the process of change happens slowly, but sometimes it is a matter of weeks, even days.

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[1] Lessig's brilliant essay is the foundational work on this topic and I have drawn heavily on it here. An overlapping account is Sunstein (1996).

[2] An optimistic view can be found in Ullmann-Margalit (1977).

As illustrations of altered meanings, consider, for example, the meaning of school prayer; the meaning of flirtatious and suggestive comments, directed at a female employee by a male employer; the meaning of gun ownership; the meaning of some kind of racial or religious epithet; the meaning of the Confederate Flag. Sometimes what was a modest meaning tax becomes a large one, or vice versa. Sometimes the sign itself changes: What was once a tax becomes a subsidy, or vice versa. In terms of what people ultimately do, such changes might make all the difference.

Social meanings are of course different in China from what they are in France; they are not the same in Senegal, Italy, Japan, and Argentina. Wearing an Islamic veil is associated with a particular identity and has a particular meaning, and it might differ from one place to another. Cross-cultural misunderstandings often occur because the meaning of action (say, wearing certain clothes) is not what the agent anticipates; the agent might be embarrassed or dismayed to have conveyed a meaning that was very far from what was intended. The point emphatically holds for behavior related to safety and health. Wearing a mask in Beijing in 2016 had a very different meaning from wearing a mask in London in that year. Some statements and actions are associated with identifiable cultures. In some places, wearing a mask might precipitate some kind of racist reaction. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, that has become far less likely.

When social meanings change, the reason might be the law (Lessig, 1995). What once was a social meaning tax might be eliminated, or even be transformed into a subsidy. If the law requires people to wear seatbelts, the meaning of wearing seatbelts suddenly becomes, for many, "I do what the law says," rather than, "I do not trust you to drive safely." If the law requires people not to discriminate on the basis of race in a community that generally favors racial discrimination, the meaning of not discriminating becomes, "I comply with the law," not, "I reject the values of my local community." When the social meaning of action becomes compliance with law, what was previously a tax has been removed, or even turned into a subsidy.

Of course it is also true that in some times and places, violations of the law have a positive social meaning; outlawing conduct can have a perverse effect for exactly that reason. Those who violate the law might seem bold, defiant, cool, or impressively independent. Consider the phenomenon of "reactance" (Brehm, 1981) by which people refuse to do something precisely because they have been ordered or strongly advised to do it. Reactance is a familiar phenomenon, and it can lead to behavior that is harmful to self or others.

In addition, law might have an expressive function (Sunstein, 2019; McAdams, 2015; Sunstein, 1995). It might give people a new and different sense of what most people think, or of what the most relevant or trusted people think. If the law forbids people from texting while driving, people might believe that citizens generally think that texting while driving is a bad idea, or that public officials, armed with relevant informa-

tion, have reached that conclusion. These points help account for the otherwise puzzling phenomenon of compliance without enforcement: widespread or automatic obedience of a legal command, even when enforcement is exceptionally rare (Kagan & Skolnick, 1993). One reason for such obedience is that the social meaning of noncompliance might be inconsiderateness or worse, a kind of defiance of the community's judgment.

Apart from law, social meanings might change because especially prominent people, or large numbers of people, are able to get them to shift. "Meaning entrepreneurs" can be crucial here, fueling large-scale changes. They might be in the private sector; they might be public officials, seeing shifts in meaning as valuable or even essential to public goals. Suppose that a well-funded educational campaign emphasizes the importance of having a "designated driver." If so, the meaning of refusing to drink can change rapidly. Or suppose that vegetarians and vegetarianism become more prominent, simply because respected and admired people say, quite prominently, that they are vegetarians. If so, the social meaning of vegetarianism might shift. Citizens might experience the equivalent of a big tax cut – or receive a kind of subsidy.

Meaning entrepreneurs of course have diverse motivations. Some of them are altruistic or in a sense even saints; they want to save lives or otherwise to prevent what they see as serious social harms. Some are self-interested; they might want to promote a product or a career. Some have identifiable economic or political motivations, which account for their particular focus.

We should be able to see here the possibility of multiple equilibria, depending on seemingly modest factors, which determine whether meaning entrepreneurs succeed or fail. For example, a meaning entrepreneur might attempt to transform the social meaning of using one's cell phone while driving, so that it is not "what people do" or "a convenience" or "kind of cool," but instead, "dangerous," or "reckless," or "indifferent to the safety of others." Under the right conditions, the transformative effort could work, at least if the meaning entrepreneur is able to start a social cascade, with the right people, at the right time, visibly adopting the new meaning (Granovetter, 2019). But with slight variations in conditions, the meaning entrepreneur might fail, and seem like a kind of fool, at least if the right people do not adopt the new meaning, or if the wrong people insist on the old one. Small factors might make all the difference. A new meaning might seem, in hindsight, to be part of the arc of history, or a robust old meaning might seem, in hindsight, to be part of entrenched culture. Both appearances might well be mirages. Nothing was inevitable.

In 2020, many nations saw numerous shifts in social meanings, as the meaning of declining to shake hands, of working from home, and of washing your hands a lot were turned upside-down. Those shifts bear directly on the question of masks. Also in 2020, officials at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention advised "the use of simple cloth face

coverings to slow the spread of the virus and help people who may have the virus and do not know it from transmitting it to others" (CDC, 2020). On public health grounds, it seemed clear that people ought to be wearing masks in public settings.

Whether people follow advice of this kind will depend in significant part on the social meaning of doing that. If a nation's leader says, "Wearing a face mask . . . I just don't see it," many people will decline to wear a face mask, because they also "just don't see it." But imagine, for example, if President Trump had announced the recommendation while wearing a mask – or at a minimum, by saying that he would personally follow the CDC's recommendation whenever in proximity to groups of (say) more than ten people. And whatever national leaders do, others can make a modest contribution to changing the meaning of wearing a mask, simply by doing as the CDC advised – and thus of increasing the likelihood that wearing a mask will be seen as what most people are doing, these days, in order to be good citizens, and in order to protect themselves and others.

But the main point is broader. In the midst of a pandemic, it is critically important that precautionary measures are subsidized, and not taxed, by their social meanings.

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