

Project 2 | Assignment 6

We have identified several moral challenges that Commonwealth faces during the time of the 1918 pandemic. One of these challenges hinges on to what degree members of that community engage in selfishness or selflessness, to what degree the group's decision are catalyzed by fear and suspicion or by care and generosity, exhibited by members of the community internally, but also directed outward, to strangers. Our instinct for survival is powerful, but must one's survival come at the expense of another's demise? Does the arrival of a pandemic and its attendant fears and dangers so thoroughly disturb the normal moral order that we should expect transgressive behaviors (such as looting, kissing someone possibly infected, or convincing oneself that a man should be killed because of his potential to spread the disease)?

With these sorts of moral complexities in the background, I invite you to turn your attention to ways in which the concept of *vulnerability*, as defined by Fineman, may help us to identify the failures of the social attitudes and personal interests that trouble Commonwealth, that lead it to become the sort of place that occupies Philip's fears:

It had occurred to Philip that ever decision made by the town since the quarantine began had been somewhat selfish. They'd placed themselves on a pedestal above all outsiders, holding their value to be superior on pain of death. It seemed wrong, even when placed against the vision of Philip's own family falling ill. He didn't know how worthy a man he was or might become, what kind of skewed and moral compass he had inherited from his mother, but he wanted to believe he was capable of selflessness. He needed to believe this.¹

Fineman envisions a world where the state (envisioned as a primary structure for supporting citizens) proceeds from an assumption of universal vulnerability and organizes its support mechanisms accordingly. In an experimental town like Commonwealth, the traditional state has been supplanted by a loosely-organized group of "magistrates" who, guided by Charles Worthy, meet to make collective decisions, with Worthy understood as both the boss of the company and the mayor of the town. When, in the passage above, Philip speak about "the town," he perhaps has in mind both its governmental structure (Charles Worthy and his magistrates) and the individuals who comprise the town. Responses to the vulnerability can come from both the governing structure and from individual residents, acting both on their own and in concert with others.

In an essay (of approximately 1250 words) I ask that you address the following question:

¹Thomas Mullen, *The Last Town on Earth* (New York: Random House, 2006): 287.

How does Fineman's concept of vulnerability enhance your reading of the novel? What, in other words, does the concept illuminate (about particular characters or about the town's response to the pandemic) that may help to explain the failure of Commonwealth?

Please upload your draft to Moodle by Sunday, October 11 at 11:00 p.m.