

Materials for the Dec 6 Topical Seminar

What Do We Owe Each Other

In the last two seminars we discussed issues that would require the possible redistribution of financial resources for the general welfare. Such redistribution requires that each of us think about whether we have a moral responsibility to participate in assuring there is a fair distribution of such resources. This raises issues related to equal treatment and fairness to others. An important way for deciding what is appropriate has a lot to do with our philosophical view of the world. For this reason, we will be looking at a few philosophical theories that attempt to address the issue of fairness and the common good. Hopefully, this will give us an understanding as to why there are different ways of looking at moral issues. Good people with the best of intentions can come up with opposing views on how to address the important issues, which are now being discussed in their often time contentious political debates. We feel sure that we will not come to a conclusion as to the best approach to these political issues, but rather, to better understand some of the bases for our differing points of view.

What follows are a list of some of the philosophies related to our discussion and a summary of the theories. As you go through them, there will be some short readings to help you along. These will be posted as appendices to this paper. You may want to look also at the references at the end of each one of the theories. There are also several videos that would be of value.

To be clear, this will not be a discussion of philosophy, as we like the credentials to do so. **At the end of this paper, David and Aram will raise some questions for discussion.**

Contractualism- T.M. Scanlon and based in Rousseau¹

Rousseau; “*The Social Contract* seeks to address: how can we be free and live together? Or, put another way, how can we live together without succumbing to the force and coercion of others? We can do so, Rousseau maintains, by submitting our individual, particular wills to the collective or general will, created through agreement with other free and equal persons. Like Hobbes and Locke before him, and in contrast to the ancient philosophers, all men are made by nature to be equals, therefore no one has a natural right to govern others, and therefore the only justified authority is the authority that is generated out of agreements or covenants.” <https://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH2a>

Morality consists in what would result if we were to make binding agreements from a point of view that respects our equal moral importance as rational autonomous agents. Treat persons in accord with principles they could not reasonably reject

Contractarianism- David Gauthier and John Rawls, based in Hobbes²

Hobbes: “Being reasonable and recognizing the rationality of this basic precept of reason, men can be expected to construct a Social Contract that will afford them a life other than that available to them in the State of Nature. This contract is constituted by two distinguishable contracts. First, they must agree to establish society by collectively and reciprocally renouncing the rights they had against one another in the State of Nature. Second, they must imbue some one person or assembly of persons with the

¹ Read materials in appendix a.

² read materials in appendix B

authority and power to enforce the initial contract. In other words, to ensure their escape from the State of Nature, they must both agree to live together under common laws, and create an *enforcement mechanism* for the social contract and the laws that constitute it. Since the sovereign is invested with the authority and power to mete out punishments for breaches of the contract which are worse than not being able to act as one pleases, men have good, albeit self-interested, reason to adjust themselves to the artifice of morality in general, and justice in particular. Society becomes possible because, whereas in the State of Nature there was no power able to "overawe them all", now there is an artificially and conventionally superior and more powerful person who can force men to cooperate. While living under the authority of a Sovereign can be harsh (Hobbes argues that because men's passions can be expected to overwhelm their reason, the Sovereign must have absolute authority in order for the contract to be successful) it is at least better than living in the State of Nature. And, no matter how much we may object to how poorly a Sovereign manages the affairs of the state and regulates our own lives, we are never justified in resisting his power because it is the only thing which stands between us and what we most want to avoid, the State of Nature."

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH2a>

A good video explaining contractarianism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Co6pNvd9mc>

Morality consists in those forms of cooperative behavior that it is mutually advantageous for self-interested agents to engage in.

Objectivism³

Objectivism is the theory espoused by Ayn Rand. "For thousands of years, people have been taught that goodness consists in serving others. "Love your brother as yourself" teach the Christian scriptures. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" preach the Marxists. Even the liberal Utilitarian philosophers, many of whom defended free market capitalism, taught that one should act always to attain "the greatest good for the greatest number." The result of this code has been a bloody trail of wars and revolutions to enforce self-sacrifice, and an endless struggle in society to achieve equality among people." " [It was] made for the era of industrial capitalism. It teaches what became plain as the West got rich: that [a harmony of interests](#) exists among rational individuals, so that no one's benefit need come at the price of another's suffering. Because one person's happiness does not come at the expense of another's, a life of mutual respect and benevolent independence is possible for all. It is the doctrine of "live and let live," to the full and in every way.

<https://atlassociety.org/objectivism/atlas-university/what-is-objectivism/objectivism-101-blog/3369-what-is-the-objectivist-position-in-morality-ethics>

Utilitarianism

"Utilitarianism is one of the best known and most influential moral theories. Like other forms of [consequentialism](#), its core idea is that whether actions are morally right or wrong depends on their effects. More specifically, the only effects of actions that are relevant are the good and bad results that they produce. A key point in this article concerns the distinction between individual actions and types of actions. Act utilitarians focus on the effects of individual actions (such as John Wilkes Booth's

³ Read Appendix C

assassination of Abraham Lincoln) while rule utilitarians focus on the effects of types of actions (such as killing or stealing).

Utilitarians believe that the purpose of morality is to make life better by increasing the amount of good things (such as pleasure and happiness) in the world and decreasing the amount of bad things (such as pain and unhappiness). They reject moral codes or systems that consist of commands or taboos that are based on customs, traditions, or orders given by leaders or supernatural beings. Instead, utilitarians think that what makes a morality be true or justifiable is its positive contribution to human (and perhaps non-human) beings.” <https://www.iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/>

A good video on utilitarianism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a739VjqdSI>

Simone Weil

Weil, of course, was not an analytic philosopher, nor a proto-postmodernist. She came to philosophy in the interwar years in a philosophical milieu of political radicalism, phenomenology, and emerging existentialism. As did most of her contemporaries, she saw philosophy in terms of the nature and challenges of the human condition, though she differed from the existentialists as to what this meant. (from *The Needs of the Soul*)

Whereas Jean-Paul Sartre and [Simone de Beauvoir](#) saw things in terms of the *individual's* radical freedom to choose their values in a Godless world, Weil took a different path. Her concern was not to perfect herself as a replacement God figure, creating values out of a supposed absolute freedom, but to face up to, to have *attended* to, the real existence of *other* people. Whereas the existentialism of [Sartre](#) saw him faced with the challenge of showing how morality was even possible, Weil took the possibility of morality as a given—as an essential and fundamental modality of human life and experience, however partial and flawed its manifestations—and sought to show what it was to take morality *seriously*.” <https://www.iep.utm.edu/weil/#H6>

The readings we recommended so far help frame a philosophical position that you might have or prefer. To put this philosophy towards answering the question what we owe each other we are suggesting you read “What Do We Owe Each Other?” by Aaron James Wendland, which is an opinion piece from the *stone reader*.⁴

Questions for Discussion

How can we apply Scanlon’s notion of contractualism for settling the issues listed below. Is it conceivable that there are a group of equal partners who can come together and decide on the common good? Or would a better model be that of David Gauthier and John Rawls who looks a Hobbes for guidance? We’ve escaped nature by forming a society that runs on the rule of law. We’ve assigned people to represent us in the society. It’s through their authority that healthcare should be decided.

⁴ See Appendix D

The Utilitarian model looks to the greatest good for the greatest number of people as its moral guide. They reject moral codes or systems that consist of commands or taboos that are based on customs, traditions, or orders given by leaders or supernatural beings. That which increases the common good is the goal, not special interests, or ideologies emanating from self-interest. This of course raises the question as to how this gets operationalized.

Ayn Rand proposed that [a harmony of interests](#) exists among rational individuals, so that no one's benefit need come at the price of another's suffering. Because one person's happiness does not come at the expense of another's, a life of mutual respect and benevolent independence is possible for all. She saw the marketplace and the free interaction of players in it as being the best way forward.

Independent players achieving all that they could achieve and doing so in principled ways is far more successful than government interventions. However, given what we have experienced in the issues below over the last 40 years, does this objectivist theory have any face value?

Let's look at some of the following questions and see where we stand on these:

- Is it society's responsibility to assure affordable healthcare for all?
- What is the best way forward in providing affordable higher education?
- Should our society strive for Equality of opportunity, or for equality of outcomes?
- Should we each have a role to play in the mutual defense of individual liberty?
- What do we owe each other when looking at global issues such as climate change and the environmental hazards of disposed plastics?
- Should all people have equal access to finite resources?
- Is it our responsibility to assure the dignity of the individual?
- When parties differ on standards of behavior, who decides which is correct?
- What role does the compelling interest of the state play in deciding individual disputes?

Appendix A

<http://www.smatthewliao.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/scanlon.pdf>

What We Owe to Each Other by T. M. Scanlon Review by Dr. S. Matthew Liao on 6 January 2002. Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2000 (ISBN: 0-674-00423-x) Scanlon's book aims to offer us a moral theory of right and wrong and of our obligations to one another. The theory is called contractualism and its central claim is that an act is right or wrong if and only if it could or could not be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject (p. 4). Scanlon recognizes that so stated, his contractualism might seem empty in the sense that one might think that the aim of offering grounds that others could not reasonably reject is an aim to which all plausible moral theories would aspire (p. 4). For example, as Scanlon himself acknowledges, utilitarians, who hold the view that an act is right only if it would produce the greatest happiness, presumably would believe that their view is one that no reasonable person could possibly reject (p. 189). However, Scanlon believes that his contractualism is in fact substantive. According to Scanlon, his contractualism holds the process of justifying to others to be 'basic' (p. 5). In other words, Scanlon believes that simply by thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject, we can 'determine the shape of more specific moral notions such as murder or betrayal (p. 5).' As Scanlon explains, even though utilitarians may also accept that an act is right if and only if it can be justified to others, what makes an action right for utilitarians is that the action has the best consequences; 'justifiability is merely a consequence of this' (p. 189); whereas for Scanlon's contractualism, justifiability is what makes an action right or wrong. The aim of Scanlon's book is to elaborate and explicate this account of contractualism. Scanlon's work is divided into the two parts. In Part I (Chs. 1-3), Scanlon explains why he takes reasons rather than desires to be 'primitive,' how reasons are related to values, and why well-being is not a 'master-value' as some consequentialists might believe it to be. In Part 2 (Chs. 4-8), Scanlon discusses the main claims of his contractualism and considers issues about responsibility, promises and relativism in light of his theory. Throughout the book, Scanlon also distinguishes his contractualism from Kant's contractualism by pointing out that his contractualism, unlike Kant's, is 'heteronomous' rather than 'autonomous' (p. 6); and from the contractualism of John Rawls, David Gauthier and R. M. Hare by arguing that unlike these other writers, his contractualism appeals to reasons rather than rationality as the sources of justification (p. 191). Scanlon has offered us some interesting and well-formulated arguments on a number of central topics in ethics, e.g., his insightful discussion that the obligation to keep a promise need not derive its moral force from the existence of a social practice of promising (Ch. 7). I have however serious reservations about Scanlon's main project, namely, whether he has succeeded in providing us with a substantive account of moral theory where 'justifiability' is taken as basic. As far as I can see, rather than justifiability's doing the work in providing us with moral answers, what are doing the work in Scanlon's moral theory are Scanlon's moral intuitions; 'justifiability' seems 'merely a consequence' of these intuitions. The book contains many instances where Scanlon seems to rely on his intuitions to arrive at moral answers, instead of his demonstrating that these answers are derived from the idea of justifiability (pp. 192-193, p. 227, p. 235, etc). To give just one example, Scanlon argues that if one has a piece of information that would be of great help to another person because it would save that person a great deal of time and effort in pursuing that person's life's project, according

to Scanlon, even if the person is not in desperate need of this information, it would surely be wrong of [one] to fail (simply out of indifference) to give her this information when there is no compelling reason not to do so. It would be unreasonable to reject a principle requiring us to help others in this way (even when they are not in desperate need), since such a principle would involve no significant sacrifice on our part. Call this the Principle of Helpfulness' (p. 224). To me, this principle seems just to be a piece of Scanlon's moral intuition. Indeed, although Scanlon claims that it would be 'unreasonable to reject a principle requiring us to help others in this way,' but why is this so? Scanlon offers no further explanations and I do not see why it would be unreasonable to reject this principle. In fact, I believe that this principle of helpfulness is not morally obligatory. To see this, consider the following: Suppose a person needs a yacht so that he can sail around the world and achieve his dream project, and suppose that I am so wealthy that it would really cost me very little to buy him a yacht, I may just decide to do so on the principle of helpfulness in order that he can pursue this dream. But rather than the principle's being a moral obligation, this principle seems to me to be supererogatory, that is, beyond the calls of duty. The reason is that while it may be the case that we have an obligation to help people obtain the universally necessary conditions for a good life such as food, water, education, etc., it does not seem to me that we have an obligation to help people to obtain whatever necessary for their pursuit of a good life. Hence, Scanlon and I have different views regarding the moral obligatoriness of this principle. More pertinently though, I do not see how this principle is the result of taking the idea of 'justifiability as being basic.' In only one instance in the book does Scanlon appear to give substance to his idea that justifiability can be taken as basic. As we shall see, though, this is more apparent than real. Scanlon considers a situation in which we must choose between saving two people versus saving one person from the same loss or injury. According to him, we can arrive at the answer that we should save the greater number by considering whether it would be permissible for one to be indifferent between saving two versus saving one. According to Scanlon, the second person in the larger group [could] complain that this principle did not take account of the value of saving his life, since it permits the agent to decide what to do in the very same way that it would have permitted had he not be present at all . . . This is unacceptable, the [additional] person [from the larger group] might argue, since his life should be given the same moral significance as anyone else's in this situation (p. 232). It follows, according to Scanlon, that saving the greater number is required because it is 'not unfair to the person who is not saved, since the importance of saving him or her has been fully taken into account' (p. 234). Here it might seem as if Scanlon has illustrated how justifiability can be taken as basic, since the reason why one should save two is that this seems to be a principle no reasonable person can reject, whereas saving only the one person seems to be a principle which the additional person in the two person group can reject. However, I would argue that what is really doing the work here is not 'justifiability' but the principle of fairness. Recall that Scanlon's explanation of why the individual in the one person group could not protest to not being saved is that it is not 'unfair' to her. Without this principle, (and assuming, for argument's sake that fairness is the appropriate consideration here), I do not see why the person in the one person group could not reasonably object to a principle that requires one to save the greater group on the ground that it is her life which would be sacrificed. I agree that once the principle of fairness is taken into account, then this could override the individual in the one person group's claim that she should be saved. But, in such a case, it seems to me that it is the principle of fairness that is determining why one should save the greater number; justifiability seems only to be a consequence of this principle. Here it is worthwhile recalling something said in the

beginning, namely, that in a trivial, empty sense, all moral theories aspire to provide grounds that others could not reasonably reject. Hence, I am not denying that justifiability plays no role in the example above. However, Scanlon's aim was to provide a moral theory that would show justifiability to be basic; that is, justifiability and nothing else would give us determinate moral answers. To the extent that he had to use the principle of fairness to arrive at a determinate answer, it seems that Scanlon has not succeeded in his aim. Scanlon has admirably tried to surmount the shortcomings of our present moral theories by presenting us with his version of contractualism. Although I have misgivings about whether he has succeeded in outlining a plausible moral theory, the original, interesting and plausible arguments contained in this book should challenge and delight all who are interested in ethics.

Appendix B

<https://reasonandmeaning.com/2015/04/13/john-rawls-moral-contractarianism/>

Summary of John Rawls' Moral Theory

[April 13, 2015 Ethics - Contractarianism](#)

John Rawls' "Hypothetical" Contract

A thinker who espoused contractarian moral philosophy was the Harvard philosopher [John Rawls](#), whose book [A Theory of Justice](#) is the single most influential philosophical ethics text of the past thirty years. Rawls' contractarian approach differs radically from the approach of either Gauthier or Harman because it finds its inspiration, not in Hobbes, but in Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.

Rawls begins by considering the *original position* where parties deliberate about the rules of right conduct that will be universally applicable in society. In the bargaining position, parties are impartial, that is, everyone's interest count equally. This is guaranteed by the so-called *veil of ignorance* that hides from contractors any knowledge of themselves. You do not know your race, sex, social class, or nationality from behind the veil of ignorance. Although parties are self-interested and want to establish rules beneficial for themselves, in reality, self-interest is ruled out by the veil of ignorance because from behind it one cannot differentiate their interests from the interests of others.

The rules agreed to by rational bargainers behind a veil of ignorance are moral rules. This solution demonstrates a hypothetical way that contract theory could account for the rules favored by ordinary moral consciousness, since the veil of ignorance assures us that impartial rules will result. However, by mitigating the role played by self-interest, this type of contract radically departs from the account of morality given by Hobbes or any neo-Hobbesians.

It is important to keep in mind that the agreement that stems from the original position is both *hypothetical* and *nonhistorical*. It is hypothetical in the sense that the principles to be derived are what the parties would, under certain legitimating conditions, agree to, not what they have agreed to. In other words, Rawls seeks to persuade us through argument that the principles of justice that he derives are in fact what we *would* agree upon if we were in the hypothetical situation of the original position and that those principles have moral weight as a result of that. It is nonhistorical in the sense that it is not supposed that the agreement has ever, or indeed could actually be entered into as a matter of fact.

Rawls claims that the parties in the original position would adopt two such principles, which would then govern the assignment of rights and duties and regulate the distribution of social and economic advantages across society. *First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.* The basic liberties of citizens are, roughly speaking, political liberty (i.e., to vote and run for office); [freedom of speech](#) and assembly, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, freedom of property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest. It is a matter of some debate whether freedom of contract can be inferred as being included among these basic liberties.

The **first principle** is more or less absolute, and may not be violated, even for the sake of the second principle, above an unspecified but low-level of economic development (i.e. the first principle is, under most conditions, lexically prior to the second principle). However, because various basic liberties may conflict, it may be necessary to trade them off against each other for the sake of obtaining the largest possible system of rights. There is thus some uncertainty as to exactly what is mandated by the principle, and it is possible that a plurality of sets of liberties satisfy its requirements.

The **second principle** is that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that:

1. a) they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (*the difference principle*).
2. b) offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity*

Rawls' claim in a) is that departures from equality of a list of what he calls primary goods – 'things which a rational man wants whatever else he wants' [Rawls, 1971, pg. 92] – are justified only to the extent that they improve the lot of those who are worst-off under that distribution in comparison with the previous, equal, distribution. His position is at least in some sense [egalitarian](#), with a proviso that equality is not to be achieved by worsening the position of the least advantaged. An important consequence here, however, is that inequalities can actually be just on Rawls's view, as long as they are to the benefit of the least well off. His argument for this position rests heavily on the claim that morally arbitrary factors (for example, the family we're born into) shouldn't determine our life chances or opportunities. Rawls is also keying on an intuition that we do not deserve inborn talents, thus we are not entitled to all the benefits we could possibly receive from them, meaning that at least one of the criteria which could provide an alternative to equality in assessing the justice of distributions is eliminated.

The stipulation in b) is lexically prior to that in a). 'Fair equality of opportunity' requires not merely that offices and positions are distributed on the basis of merit, but that all have reasonable opportunity to acquire the skills on the basis of which merit is assessed. It is often thought that this stipulation, and even the first principle of justice, may require greater equality than the difference principle, because large social and economic inequalities, even when they are to the advantage of the worst-off, will tend to seriously undermine the value of the political liberties and any measures towards fair equality of opportunity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that contract theory is viable to the extent that individuals are relatively equal in power when the contract is both negotiated and renegotiated. But, in the real world, this does not appear to be the case. Thus, we always have an imperfect contract which represents the interests of the stronger, more interested, or more persuasive parties. Whether an "equilibrium" can be reached in the bargaining process is problematic, inasmuch as individuals rarely encounter each other "on a level playing field" even when interacting within the contract. So even though it may be the case that morality is, as the moral philosopher Gilbert Harman supposes, nothing more than the result of bargaining and power-struggling between various groups, we can still ask whether this *should be the case*. Many accept the "is" but reject the "ought." And if they do, then morality "ought to be" more than

just a contract between rational bargainers. (which is one reason why Rawls' stipulates the veil of ignorance.)

Finally, let us note how much of contemporary western civilization operates within a contract framework. We have contracts that govern our property, our mortgages, and our marriages. We have contracts that state who will speak for us if we cannot speak for ourselves and what kind of medical technology is deemed appropriate to sustain our lives. In short, we are a contract society. Whether this is for the better, only the reader can judge.

Appendix C

<https://atlassociety.org/objectivism/atlas-university/what-is-objectivism/objectivism-101-blog/3369-what-is-the-objectivist-position-in-morality-ethics>

What is the Objectivist Position in Morality (Ethics)?

Details

June 15, 2010

William Thomas

Question: What is the Objectivist position in morality (ethics)?

Answer:

My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these. To live, man must hold three things as the ruling values of his life: Reason—Purpose—Self-esteem. Reason, as his only tool of knowledge—Purpose, as his choice of the happiness which that tool must proceed to achieve—Self-esteem, as his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: worthy of living. These three values imply and require all of man's virtues...

— [Ayn Rand](#) , [Atlas Shrugged](#) .

For thousands of years, people have been taught that goodness consists in serving others. "Love your brother as yourself" teach the Christian scriptures. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need" preach the Marxists. Even the liberal Utilitarian philosophers, many of whom defended free market capitalism, taught that one should act always to attain "the greatest good for the greatest number." The result of this code has been a bloody trail of wars and revolutions to enforce self-sacrifice, and an endless struggle in society to achieve equality among people.

Meanwhile, like the barnyard revolutionaries of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the advocates of uniformity and self-sacrifice strain to prove themselves "more equal than others," so that *they* may determine how much love is enough, or what your ability is and what your needs *should be*. It seems loving our fellow man is a fine way to hate him.

The Objectivist ethics rebuilds morality from the ground up. "You cannot say 'I love you' if you cannot say the 'I'," wrote [Ayn Rand](#) . According to [Objectivism](#) , a person's own life and happiness is the ultimate good. To achieve happiness requires a morality of rational selfishness, one that does not give undeserved rewards to others and that does not ask them for oneself.

Traditional moral codes have taught that social life is a war of dog-eat-dog and that people must restrain themselves through self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. "Live simply, that others may simply live," is their slogan. It is a doctrine suited to a world of peasant villages and rapacious conquerors.

[Objectivism](#) , on the other hand, was made for the era of industrial capitalism. It teaches what became plain as the West got rich: that [a harmony of interests](#) exists among rational individuals, so that no one's

benefit need come at the price of another's suffering. Because one person's happiness does not come at the expense of another's, a life of mutual respect and benevolent independence is possible for all. It is the doctrine of "live and let live," to the full and in every way.

Because one person's happiness does not come at the expense of another's, a life of mutual respect and benevolent independence is possible for all.

Now how can such a harmony of interests exist? Aren't our interests really in conflict? Aren't we each at the other's throat? The answer is that human beings are not vampires, feeding on each other, nor need we live as hunter-gatherers, simply feeding on limited natural resources. Where animals graze the land, humans can cultivate it. The human mode of living is production: the creation of value from the raw materials around us. Human beings see a rock, and we invent tools, smelting techniques, stone buildings, steel girders, paved streets, and so on and on. We see a tree, and we make furniture, fuel, papers, books, construction materials, medicines, and so on and on. The application of reason to our problems allows us to create solutions. Thus we are not like dogs squabbling over meat or children sharing a pie; we are each creators, making new *goods* through our productive work, materially and morally.

Material well-being is possible for everyone, and no one needs to make others poor to get rich. Consider the fact that the richest people in America are entrepreneurs who created products that millions of people were glad to use. And since knowledge, ideas, and other non-material goods can be shared as widely as need be, we are not in fundamental competition with others for our spiritual needs, either. So, because reason is our means of survival, we stand to benefit from every discovery others make, every image or story they share, and every dollar they earn by production and trade.

[Objectivism](#) holds that the purpose of morality is to define a code of values in support of one's own life, a human life. The values of Objectivism are the *means* to a happy life. They include such things as wealth, love, satisfaction in work, education, artistic inspiration, and much more. We choose many of our values, such as what work we enjoy and who are our friends and lovers. But we cannot choose the need for material goods or for friendship, if a happy life is what we seek. The ultimate choice open to us is whether we want life or not. Life is a choice we must make consciously and seriously, argues Rand, or else we may find that, by default, we have chosen the alternative: suffering and death.

The cardinal values of [Objectivism](#) are Reason, Purpose, and Self. Reason, because it is our means of gaining knowledge, and, through production, our means of survival. Purpose, because each of us has free will and must direct himself toward chosen goals, through a chosen course of life. Self, because without self-esteem, a self-motivating being cannot find the means to continue. Just as one's own needs lie at the heart of the Objectivist ethical code, so should respect for them lie at the heart of one's values.

The Objectivist ethics is a code that honors achievement and counsels the celebration, not the envy, of greatness. It honors the creativity not only of artists and scholars, but of the producers on whose shoulders civilization rests: industrialists and engineers, investors and inventors. It holds that any work is spiritual that is well and thoughtfully done, no matter what the scale of achievement, from the factory line worker to the corporate CEO, and from the most unknown clerk to the most celebrated movie star.

The virtues of Objectivism, then, define principles of action that lead to the achievement of objective values, considered in the full context of human life. The key principle of the Objectivist ethics

is [rationality](#) , as against mysticism and whim. The ethics is a code of [benevolence](#) and [justice](#) toward other people: holding evil-doers to account for their vices, but treating rational and productive people with good will and generosity. It entails [integrity](#) , allowing no breach between our principles and our actions. A rational being practices [honesty](#) , loving the truth more than deception; and he lives first-hand, on the basis of his own judgment and effort, so [independence](#) is a virtue. The Objectivist ethics places industry and [productivity](#) in one's chosen work at the center of life's concerns. It is the code of a person who holds his head up with [pride](#) , in an objective appreciation of his merits and in aspiration to improvement in the future.

Traditional ethics contrast the image of man as an animal with the ideal of man as an otherworldly monk. Man is by nature a ravening beast, on this view, and he must be taught self-denial and self-sacrifice to be angelic and meek. Objectivism holds that man lives best as a trader, acting rationally for his own sake and dealing with others by exchanging value for value. Traditional ethics extol courage in the face of death as a virtue; Objectivism counsels integrity in the long-term pursuit of happiness. Traditional ethics extol charity as the mark of nobility; Objectivism extols productive achievement, because no one exists merely for the sake of others. It is an ethic for those who want all life has to offer, consistently, over the full course of life.

<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/what-do-we-owe-each-other/>

What Do We Owe Each Other?

BY AARON JAMES WENDLAND

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The thousands of refugees who continue to arrive in Europe each day face barriers: not only physical barriers — walls, fences, barbed wire — but an even deeper resistance, in the nationalism and xenophobia bubbling up across the Continent.

After World War II, Levinas's abiding concern was to describe the concrete source of ethical relations between human beings: our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others.

A handful of recent events — Islamic State attacks in Istanbul, Paris and elsewhere, as well as the mass assault of women in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve — continue to feed a deep-seated and often irrational fear of the "other." And then there is the debate about refugees coming to the United States, where a nationalist sentiment has also emerged, often in the rhetoric of certain presidential candidates.

Now, in Germany and elsewhere, doors are closing. But what are the potential consequences of this resistance to outsiders, to those in need? Is it justified? Do we owe the suffering and dispossessed something more, if we are to call ourselves ethical beings?

Few philosophers confronted questions like these more directly than Emmanuel Levinas. Born into a Jewish family in Kaunas, Lithuania, in 1906, Levinas moved to France in 1923 and studied philosophy in Germany under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the late 1920s. Levinas made a name for himself in the 1930s as one of the first interpreters and defenders of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology in France, but his commitment to and understanding of phenomenology's often arcane search for the meaning of being was transformed during the Second World War. Levinas was drafted into the French Army in 1939. He was taken prisoner by the Nazis in 1940. And while his status as an officer saved him from being sent to the concentration camps, all the members of his immediate family were killed by the Nazis for their Jewish faith and ancestry.

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The epigraph to Levinas's "Otherwise Than Being" reads: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions upon millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism." The book that follows is a profound meditation on the essence of exclusion. It is also an uncompromising account of a basic hospitality that constitutes our humanity. And

Levinas's extensive body of work has much to teach us about the nature and danger of nationalism as well as the necessity of welcoming and protecting vulnerable human beings.

Levinas traces the roots of virulent nationalism to the sharp distinctions we draw between 'same' and 'other.'

Nationalism is the result of identification and differentiation and it follows from the similarities and differences we see between ourselves and others. As an American, you share the same upbringing with many of your fellow citizens. Your background is different than that of most Britons or Italians. And it is partially by recognizing the traits you share with Americans and then distinguishing them from citizens of other states that you develop your sense of identity. But as we know from history, this identity building, taken to extremes, can often lead to horrible things.

Levinas traces the roots of virulent nationalism to the sharp distinctions we draw between "same" and "other." And while identification and differentiation enables the formation of personal identity, it can also result in hostility when the traits we use to distinguish ourselves from others are totalized and taken as absolute. "Totalization" occurs when members of one group take a feature of another group to be both definitive of that group and all members in it. Generalizations like "Americans are outgoing," "Brits are reserved" and "Italians are passionate" are often unfairly applied to individual Americans, Britons or Italians. And negative stereotypes such as "Jews are greedy," "Blacks are dangerous" and "Muslims are terrorists" have a history of leading to unjust aggression against members of those communities. In each of these examples, we reduce others to a simple or single category that distinguishes "them" from "us" in an absolute way. And this reduction often produces an allergic reaction to others; a reaction exemplified by the rush to build fences around Europe to keep Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian refugees out.

Levinas's antihistamine for our allergic reactions involves three things: an appeal to the "infinity" in human beings, a detailed description of face-to-face encounters and an account of a basic hospitality that constitutes humanity.

Infinity is Levinas's technical term for the idea that other people are always more than our categories can capture. You may be a British Anglican from the Midlands, but you're much more than that. You are a father, a son and a husband. You have black hair, blue eyes and a graying beard. You have political opinions and controversial beliefs about the beginning of the world. And so on, ad infinitum.

Similarly, a Syrian refugee may be Muslim, but she's much more than that! She is a mother, a daughter and a wife. She has black hair, brown eyes and a sharp jaw-line. She has political opinions and controversial beliefs about the beginning of the world. And so on, ad infinitum. By calling attention to this infinity in human beings, Levinas was trying to show us that our identifications and differentiations always fail as adequate descriptions of others. And he aims to interrupt our totalizing and xenophobic tendencies by indicating the irreducible humanity of other human beings.

Hospitality, welcoming and sharing are the foundation upon which all communities are formed, and is at the root of our basic humanity.

Concretely, the irreducible humanity of other human beings is found in the face. Faces confront us directly and immediately and they refuse typologies. Levinas indicates the irreducibility of others by speaking of God's presence in the face, but his account of the face also illustrates another aspect of human beings: vulnerability. The face is naked, exposed, and open to attack. It is hungry and thirsty. And it seeks protection and nourishment. Levinas invokes the stranger, the widow and the orphan as examples of deprivation. We could also add asylum seekers and embattled exiles as acute cases of suffering. However, Levinas's general account of vulnerability shows us how hospitality in the face of another's need constitutes individual human beings and bespeaks a humanity that precedes and is more fundamental than the establishment of all national boundaries.

Hospitality, according to Levinas, involves curtailing our enjoyment of the world when confronted with another's wants. It is exemplified by the act of welcoming another into our home and sharing our possessions. Welcoming and sharing with others determines who and what we are as specific human beings. Levinas expresses this idea in a discussion of subjectivity in which the self is described as a host and hostage to others. We are hosts to others because welcoming them into our world is a precondition for a relation of identification and differentiation between us. And we are hostages because our personal identity is determined by how we respond to the demands others place upon us.

For instance, your identity as an Italian high school teacher is achieved with your recognition and response to the fact that others want an education. Likewise, a Syrian man's status as a trafficker of refugees is possible via his recognition and response to an exile's need for safe passage across the sea. With these examples we discover that our place in a distinct human community is based on our ability to respond to the wants and needs of others. Yet Levinas shows us that hospitality not only determines our identities in specific communities but is also the mark of humanity — hospitality is the basis of human community as such.

The existence of distinct human communities presupposes our ability to welcome and share our property with others. "To recognize the other," Levinas wrote in "Totality and Infinity," "is to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality." Once our enjoyment of the world has been questioned by another's need, hospitality establishes human community in the act of giving and with the creation of a common tongue. Language, Levinas wrote in his work, is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things that are mine to the other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common. It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment. The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal.

While the creation of a common tongue is the basis of human community, language also allows us to label others and thus explicitly identify and distinguish our selves from them. This facilitates our tendency to overlook a face in need and see a “Syrian” or “Muslim” that is not like me. The foundation of a human community also raises the question of “other others” whereby any face-to-face encounter may be interrupted by the face of another. We are asked, in other words, to share our possessions with *all* human beings. Levinas sees this request as an infinite but impossible responsibility, since we could give what we have to anyone, but we do not have enough to give to all. In the face of this impossible responsibility we require justice: the systematic organization and distribution of resources amongst human beings. And from here we are not far from the formation of nation states with rigid identities and physical boundaries and the barbed-wire resistance with which we began.

Although we seem to have come full circle, Levinas has taught us that our responsibility for others is the foundation of all human communities, and that the very possibility of living in a meaningful human world is based on our ability to give what we can to others. And since welcoming and sharing are the foundation upon which all communities are formed, no amount of inhospitable nationalism can be consistently defended when confronted with the suffering of other human beings. “In the relationship between same and other, my welcoming of the other is,” as Levinas puts it, “the *ultimate* fact.” It is the hospitality of humanity, or a peace prior to all hostility. And in this primary peace, in this basic welcoming of refugees, Levinas reminds us that “things figure not as what one *builds* but as what one *gives*.”

Aaron James Wendland is a research fellow at the University of Tartu, in Estonia, and a co-editor of the books “[Wittgenstein and Heidegger](#)” and the forthcoming “Heidegger on Technology.”

*Now in print: “[The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments](#),” An anthology of essays from *The Times’s* philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.*