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The Moral Logic of Borders: Birthplace as Privilege

Joseph Carens challenges us to reconsider immigration not from the perspective of national entitlement but from the standpoint of moral equality. In affluent democracies, borders often feel natural and justified because they protect those on the inside. Carens argues that this sense of normalcy hides the profound moral implications of border control. Borders, he writes, resemble "the modern equivalent of feudal class privilege" an inherited status that determines opportunity based entirely on the accident of birth (Carens, 2013, p. 226). If all human beings are equal in moral value, then the enormous disparities produced and maintained by restrictive immigration require serious ethical scrutiny.

In this analysis of Carens book, "*The Ethics of Immigration*," I outline central claims and explain how he builds his moral logic. I will then present two peer responses, one supportive and one skeptical. I will conclude by applying concepts from sourced articles to illustrate how public narratives about crime, illegality, and "invasion" distort the immigration debate and obscure the deeper questions Carens wants us to confront.

Carens begins by drawing attention to how border controls allocate life chances. A person born in the United States inherits access to stability, education and mobility that someone born in rural Honduras, Haiti, or Sierra Leone could never access regardless of effort. This disparity is not the product of personal merit but of global inequality and state coercion. As Carens notes, people fleeing poverty or violence do not confront neutral administrative hurdles but guards and guns, literal force determining who may move and who may not (p. 225). He asks: on what moral grounds can one deny entry to peaceful individuals seeking only the chance to build a decent life? If democratic societies pride themselves on equality, what justifies a global system that locks billions into poverty because of birthplace? From this starting point, Carens lays out three interrelated reasons for more open borders.

First, freedom of movement is a vital human interest. Democratic states already recognize internal mobility as a basic freedom; citizens can move from New York to California without seeking permission, and any attempt to restrict internal movement would be seen as a significant infringement on liberty (pp. 227-231). Carens argues that the moral rationale underlying internal free movement applies equally across state borders. The distinction between internal and external movement, he contends, has no deep moral basis.

Second, freedom of movement is essential for equality of opportunity. Carens shows that democratic values require social position not to be determined by birth circumstances such as class or race. Yet modern borders operate exactly like feudal

barriers once did, restricting opportunities for talent and motivation simply because they were born in poor countries (pp. 228-229). Keeping borders closed helps maintain global inequalities by preventing people from accessing opportunities elsewhere. In this sense, closed borders are not just policy choices but mechanisms that enriches a global caste system.

Third, Carens argues that recognizing movement across borders as a human right follows principles democratic societies already endorse. The right to internal freedom of movement is enshrined in major human rights documents, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (p. 238). Carens uses what he calls the "cantilever argument": if democratic states already accept internal mobility as a human right because it protects vital interest, consistency requires extending that right across borders unless there is a morally compelling reason not to (pp. 238-240). None of the typical objections, he argues, withstand scrutiny.

Carens also addresses concerns about global inequality and "brain drain." Critics argue that opening borders might worsen inequality by allowing talented individuals to leave poor countries. Carens replies that such claims rely on implausible assumptions, such as the idea that rich states keep their borders closed to help poor states (p.235). Even if mobility does not eliminate global inequality entirely, Carens insists it remains a profound moral interest: millions of people risk their lives crossing borders because the opportunities in rich states can transform their futures.

To understand how Carens' ideas resonate outside philosophical theory, I shared his arguments with two peers. Their reactions reveal the tension between moral ideals and public anxieties about immigration. As Durand and Massey (2019) argue, public anxieties about immigration are often rooted in "fact-free" political narratives rather than empirical evidence. For more than five decades, U.S. border policy has been shaped by fear, symbolic enforcement, and political posturing rather than realities on the ground, which helps explain concerns like Peer 1's persist even when data contradicts them.

Peer 1 raised concerns about disorder, security, and the practical limits of open borders, Carens and the empirical research we studied offer several strong counterpoints that complicate those fears. Carens does not deny that states have legitimate interests in safety or public order; instead, he argues that these interests are often used far more expansively than the evidence supports. For example, Carens emphasizes that entire groups of migrants as potential threats collapses the distinction between targeted security checks and blanket exclusion based on place of origin or appearance, distinct democratic principles require us to maintain (pp. 236-237).

1. "Borders are needed for safety, otherwise chaos would result."

Peer 1 emphasized that without borders, states could not maintain justice systems or rule of law. However, Carens explicitly argues that open borders do not abolish states, laws, police institutions, or accountability (pp. 229-231). Freedom of

movement does not eliminate government authority; it simply removes birthplace as the gatekeeping criterion for entry. Carens' analogy to internal mobility is key here: allowing Americans to move freely from Texas to New York has never undermined law enforcement, economic stability, or democratic order. The same moral logic applies internationally unless we assume that foreigners possess inherently different moral standing, a claim Carens rejects as incompatible with democratic equality (pp. 227-228).

Furthermore, research on crime contradicts the assumptions that migrants destabilize safety. Both the Brennan Center and The Marshall Project found no relationship between increased migration and crime rates, and in many cases, immigration correlates with lower levels of violence (Seid et al., 2024; Marshall Project, 2019). If the empirical evidence shows migration does not create disorder, then using "safety" as a blanket justification for border restrictions becomes morally and factually weak.

2. "Open borders would flood the U.S. with gangs, cartels, and criminals."

Peer 1 expressed a fear that cartels or criminal networks would exploit open borders. But this assumption again conflicts with both evidence and historical analysis. Organized crime thrives because borders are closed. Criminal networks profit from smuggling, forged documents, and black-market crossing routes, the same way Prohibition created opportunities for bootleggers. When safer legal pathways exist, criminal intermediaries lose their market. This aligns with García

Hernández's argument that the criminalization of migration produces the very harms it claims to prevent, states manufacture "illegality," enabling exploitation and underground economies (García Hernández, 2021). Thus, the best way to undercut cartels is not through harsher borders but through legal, regulated mobility.

3. "The U.S. cannot sustain more people; it struggles to support citizens now."

Peer 1 argued that a weak job market and limited resources make open borders impossible. But the economic literature cited consistently shows the opposite pattern. Immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, pay taxes, contribute to social security, and are ineligible for nearly all federal benefits (Learning for Justice, 2017; Wachs, 2025). Wang's historical analysis of the 1930's Mexican Reparation demonstrates that mass deportation campaigns damaged the U.S. economy by removing essential workers and shrinking consumer markets, worsening unemployment among citizens (Wang, 2024). Economic decline is not caused by immigrants entering; it is often worsened when immigrants are removed.

Carens also highlights the inequality inherent in the "resource scarcity" argument: wealthier nations protect their advantages by restricting movement from poorer nations, effectively freezing global inequality (Carens, 2013, pp.228-229). The question is not whether America has enough resources, it does, but whether fairness requires that opportunity to be shared based on moral equality rather than birthplace.

4. “Birthplace determines opportunity, but that’s just the reality of life.”

Peer 1 emphasized individual agency, arguing that people must “take the cards they’re dealt with.” Carens does not deny that individual scan succeeds despite obstacles; his claim is that a just society should not impose arbitrary barriers that prevent people from even accessing opportunities. Someone born in rural Mexico, Nepal, or Sudan is denied entry to the U.S. not because of their character, merit, or actions, but purely because they were born on the wrong side of the line. The structural forces shown in the documentary, *The Other Side of Immigration* reveal that many migrants are pushed to leave home due to global economic policies, not personal failings (Germano, 2010). Birthplaces determine opportunity not because it should, but because borders make it so.

5. “Profiling after 9/11 shows that we can’t treat everyone equally.”

Peer 1’s experience with racial profiling is real and important. But their example strengthens Carens’ point. Profiling demonstrates how border controls and immigration enforcement often operate according to racial biases rather than evidence-based threats. “Menjívar (2021) calls this the racialization of “illegality,” explaining that certain groups, particularly Latino migrants, become socially marked as “illegal” regardless of their legal status. García Hernández explains that immigrants are criminalized through law and policy in ways that do not reflect actual risk but reflect political anxieties (2021). Carens argues that a system grounded in racial fear and inherited privilege is ethically indefensible (pp.236-238).

Rather than proving moral equality is unrealistic, profiling shows the moral urgency of rethinking how border systems classify and exclude people.

Peer 2: “Open borders wouldn’t cause new problems; they would expose the ones we already have.”

Peer 2 argued that the instability people fear from open borders is really a reflection of deeper systemic issues. They suggested that American prosperity has long depended on global exploitation, and that the existing order is built on uneven rules where “someone has to win, and someone has to lose.” Carens directly addresses this concern, noting that contemporary global inequality is not natural but the legacy of colonial extraction and international power imbalances. Borders help preserve these inherited advantages by restricting mobility and shielding wealthy states from the consequences of global injustice (Carens, 2013, pp. 230-232) In this sense, open borders would not introduce chaos but expose moral contradictions that already exist (pp. 239-240).

Peer 2 also believed that immigration pressures reveal internal dysfunction within the system rather than create it. This aligns with García Hernández’s observation that immigration enforcement has expanded largely to manage political and social anxieties, not because migrants pose inherent dangers (2021, pp. 112-115). The issues Peer 2 anticipated, economic tension, cultural conflict, resource strain, often stem from broader structural failures that migration merely makes visible.

Their skepticism toward the "American Dream" as a universal ideal further echoes Learning for Justice (2017) critiques that this narrative masks systemic barriers and implying that suffering is a prerequisite for success, a point Peer 2 found intuitively troubling. Instead of showing moral weakness in migrants, these disparities reveal the limits of relying on culturally specific ideals to justify exclusion.

Finally, Peer 2's sense that open borders would "shake things up" is contradicted by empirical research. Washington (2019) similarly argues that fears of chaos misunderstood the role borders play in producing danger. He notes that borders funnel migrants into deadly routes, creating unnecessary deaths, while economic modeling consistently shows that freer mobility would dramatically increase global productivity. Political rhetoric often portrays migration as destabilizing, but The Marshall Project (2019) shows that fears of migrant-driven chaos are not supported by data. Likewise, *The Other Side of Immigration* (Germano, 2010) demonstrates that instability in sending countries is driven by global economic structures, not by migrants themselves. This suggests that the "problems" Peer 2 anticipates come from systemic inequality, not from mobility.

Taken together, the peer dialogues and sourced materials reveal how complex and ethically charged the question of borders is. The fears, hopes, and contradictions expressed in these conversations illustrate exactly why Carens believes immigration ethics forces us to reconsider the foundations of democratic equality.

Engaging with Carens' argument alongside my peers made it clear to me that the real debate is not simply about border policy, but about what we believe equality, fairness, and moral responsibility require of us. Peer 1's concerns reflected the fears that often dominate public discourse, yet the evidence consistently undercuts those assumptions. Peer 2's systemic critique pushed me to consider how borders function not only as physical barriers but as moral and political shields that hide structural inequality. After analyzing Carens closely, I find his central claim persuasive: if we truly believe in equal moral worth, we cannot justify a global system where opportunity is determined by birthplace. Even if open borders raise practical challenges, the ethical burden rests with those who defend exclusion to explain why inherited citizenship should operate like a modern form of feudal privilege. For me, the hardest part is not imagining a world with freer movement' it is reckoning honestly with the injustices embedded in the system we already accept.

Whether or not one endorses fully open borders, Carens compels us to confront the moral costs of the status quo. As Golash-Boza and Ceciliano-Navarro (2019 show, these costs are not abstract. Deportation often results in what they call "social death", marked by family separation, economic abandonment, and exposure to violence in sending countries. Their research demonstrates that exclusionary policies inflict deep and lasting harm on individuals and communities, reinforcing Carens's claim that borders sustain an unjust global hierarchy. Birthplace should not determine destiny. Democratic values demand more than inherited privilege disguised as natural order. Carens' suggest that a more just and human

immigration system would allow far greater freedom of movement. The real radicalism lies not in imagining open borders, but in accepting the deep inequalities maintained by closed ones.

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