

# Lecture 08: Central Themes

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## 1. The Initial Question

Is nationality morally irrelevant?

## 2. Nussbaum's Position

'To count people as moral equals is to treat nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, race and gender as 'morally irrelevant'—as irrelevant to that equal standing.

Of course, these factors properly enter into our deliberations in many contexts.

But the accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth.

It is not ... a determinant of moral worth.

We should view the equal worth of all human beings as a regulative constraint on our political actions and aspirations' (Nussbaum 1996, p. 133).

Nationality is a 'morally irrelevant characteristic' (Nussbaum 1996, p. 5)

Recognising that nationality is morally irrelevant does not mean treating it as emotionally or practically irrelevant.

## 3. Objections to Nussbaum's Position?

The following appear to be considerations against Nussbaum's position. Are they?

You want to say that nations are morally irrelevant, but people, individually and collectively, are typically in a position of choosing between national identities (e.g. Indian vs Hindu nationalism). They are not choosing whether or not to adopt a national identity. And some identities leave people more open to including others in the domain of concern than others.

You want to say that nations are morally irrelevant, but activists who have transformed societies have done so by working through national traditions (Burke, King).

'solutions are not to be found in abstractions like cosmopolitan, but in renewal of our various intact moral communities' (McConnel, 1996 p. 84).

## 4. Scarry's Two Perspectives

Q1 : If I think nationality is morally irrelevant, what follows for me?

Q2 : Given how people actually are, given their moral psychology, given 'the limits on imagining other people' (Scarry 1996, p. 110), given the mechanisms through which change can be effected, how could we provide an 'authorizing base for the ethical principle one wants to see

enforced'?

## 5. Better Arguments against Nussbaum's Position

### 5.1. Preliminary: Nation vs State

nation : 'an imagined community of culture or ancestry running beyond the scale of the face-to-face and seeking political expression' (Appiah 1996, p. 27)

states : 'regulate our lives through forms of coercion that will always require moral justification. State institutions ... are ... necessary to so many modern human purposes ... [T]o do its job the state has to have a monopoly on certain forms of authorized coercion' (Appiah 1996, p. 28)

### 5.2. Obligations as Citizens

'our obligations as democratic citizens go beyond our duties as politically unorganized individuals, because our capacity to act effectively to further justice increases when we are empowered as citizens, and so therefore does our responsibility to act to further justice' (Gutman 1996, p. 69)

### 5.3. It Is States which Pay

1. Commitments cost money and lives.

2. It is states which pay.

Therefore:

3. Citizens have ‘the ethical right to make distinctions’. (Glazer p. 62)

## 6. Bok and Sen on Sidgwick’s Dilemma

### 6.1. Sidgwick’s Dilemma

‘Henry Sidgwick took the contrast between [...] two perspectives to be so serious as to threaten any coherent view of ethics. On one hand, he held as the fundamental principle of ethics “that another’s greater good is to be preferred to one’s own lesser good.” According to this principle, any sacrifice on one’s own part would be called for, so long as it could achieve a greater good for others, no matter where they lived. On the other hand, Sidgwick also accepted what he called the common-sense view that our obligations to help others differ depending on the relationships in which we stand to them—relationships of family member, friend, neighbor, and fellow citizen.’ (Bok 1996, p. 40)

### 6.2. Sen on the Domain of Concern

The primary thing is to ‘bring everyone into the domain of concern, without eliminating anyone’. After doing that, we may find reason to

give ‘additional weight to the interests of those who are linked to us in some significant way’ (Sen 1996, p. 114).

## 7. Conclusion

Insofar as our concern is with global justice, it may not matter very much whether or not nationality is morally relevant.

## References

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