Chapter 14
The Ethics of Nationality
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I

The second proposition contained in the idea of nationality is that nations are ethical communities. In acknowledging a national identity, I am also acknowledging that I owe special obligations to fellow members of my nation which I do not owe to other human beings. This proposition is a contentious one, for it seems to cut against a powerful humanitarian sentiment which can be expressed by saying that every human being should matter equally to us. Each person can feel happiness and pain, each person can feel respected when his or her claims are recognized and demeaned when they are not, so how can it be right to give priority or special treatment to some human beings just because they are tied to us by the kind of bonds identified in the last chapter? From an ethical point of view, nationality may seem to give our feelings for our companions a role in our practical reasoning that is rationally indefensible.

To get a grip on the issues here, I am going to begin by distinguishing between ethical universalism and ethical particularism. These are two competing accounts of the structure of ethical thought, and I shall argue that it makes a big difference to our understanding of nationality which account we accept. The division between them is not, however, rigid: it is possible to start from a universalist position and then to move considerable distance to accommodate particularist concerns, and vice versa. It is also important not to confuse this question of the structure of an ethical theory with the question of its content. Someone who subscribes to ethical universalism might, for instance, be a utilitarian or on the other hand a defender of natural rights. How far the division between universalism and particularism coincides with substantive differences in the content of ethics is not an issue I am addressing here.

So where does the distinction lie? Ethical universalism gives us a certain picture of what ethics is about, the elements of which are individuals with their generic human capacities, considered for these purposes as standing apart from and prior to their relationships to other individuals. Each person is an agent capable of making choices surrounded by a universe of other such agents, and the principles of ethics specify what he must do towards them, and what he may claim in return from them. Because these principles are to be universal in form, only general facts about other individuals can serve to determine my duties towards them. Thus, a principle that might figure in a universalist ethics might be "thou shalt not kill". On the other hand, what we might call relational facts about Tom, facts about some relationship in which he already stands to me, cannot enter the picture at this fundamental level. So the fact that Tom is my brother or my neighbour cannot, on a universalist view of ethics, count in determining my duty towards him at the basic level. Now as we shall see shortly, an ethical particularist may well want to argue that at a less fundamental level such facts as these should count in determining my duty towards Tom. But these have to be brought in by means of an argument showing why, in the light of the fundamental principles, it may be justifiable to act on the basis of such relational facts. No ethical universalist can allow because he is my brother to stand as a basic reason for action.

Ethical particularism is simply the opposite of this. It holds that relations between persons are part of the basic subject-matter of ethics, so that fundamental principles may be attached directly to these relations. It involves a different picture of the ethical universe, in which agents are already encumbered with a variety of ties and commitments to particular other agents, or to groups or collectivities, and they begin their ethical reasoning from those commitments. Different forms of ethical particularism will portray those ties in different ways, and attach significance to different relational facts. Moreover, to say that we must begin our ethical reasoning by taking account of the various relationships in which we stand to others is not to say that we must conclude by endorsing the moral demands that conventionally attach to those relationships. Because he is my brother I can count as a basic reason for the particularist, but this does not mean that I am bound to behave towards him as convention dictates that brothers should behave towards one another.

Now it seems that both ethical universalism and ethical particularism have strong arguments in their favour. On the one hand, there is little doubt that we do feel a sense of responsibility to other human beings considered merely as such. On the other hand, in our everyday life we decide what to do primarily by considering what our relationships to others, and our memberships of various groups, demand of us. So it seems natural to look for some compromise view that would do justice to both of these powerful intuitions. How, starting from a universalist perspective, might we try to explain and justify particular ethical commitments?

There are two broad avenues that we might follow. (Which we choose will depend in part on the content of our universalist ethics.) First, we might argue that, in order to realize the values that lie at the base of our ethical theory most effectively, it makes sense for each agent to pursue those values in relation to particular other agents rather than the whole universe of agents. There is, to speak, a parceling out of the basic duties so that I am given a relatively concrete set of duties to carry out in my day-to-day existence. Thus, to take the example given earlier, suppose that one of our basic principles is "thou shalt not kill". It may be that this principle is discharged most effectively if each of us takes care of the needy in our immediate environment. Why is that? Well, first of all, there are many possible relievers and many people in need, so there is a problem of coordination. We want to ensure that everyone in need gets taken care of, and if that is as far as possible there is no duplication of the need. If we say that each person should
look after their own family first, next their immediate neighbours, then after that other members of their local community, and so forth, we may hope to achieve these two desiderata. Second, I am likely to be far better placed to relieve the needs of some people than others, partly because it is simply more feasible for me to transfer the necessary resources, and partly because I will know more about what is actually needed by the particular people in question. I am likely to know in detail what members of my family need, and I can get resources to them easily. So, we require conventions to decide who is to discharge duties such as this in particular cases, and it is easy to see that the most effective conventions will be ones that take account of relationships like those we find in families. Let us call this the 'useful convention' method of getting from universal duties to particular ones. The idea is that, if every one acts on the convention in question ("Help members of your family first, etc."), all of us together will end up better discharging a duty that is universal in form.

The second avenue involves arguing that, from the universal perspective, each of us is empowered to create special relationships of various kinds, establishing particular sets of rights and obligations. The simplest case would be a promise or contract: by making a promise or entering a contract, we confer special rights on our partners in agreement, and undertake special duties towards them. This is justified from a universalist perspective because it is seen as valuable for people to have the moral power to enter such agreements. (It promotes their well-being, it is an essential part of their freedom, etc.) The argument can be extended to relationships within the family and to membership of other groups by portraying these groups as voluntary associations: I am entitled freely to enter such associations, and once I have become a member I am subject to the rules and obligations of membership. (It is implicit in the story that I cannot enter any such association, but at the very least only those associations whose purpose does not contravene the basic principles of universal ethics.) Let us call this the 'voluntary creation' route from universal duties to particular ones. The general idea, to summarise, is that it is valuable from a universal point of view for people to have the moral power to bind themselves into special relationships with ethical content.

If these are the ways in which universalists typically try to accommodate our sense that special relationships and special loyalties matter to us ethically, how do particularists try to account for universal duties? The picture of ethical life favoured by particularists tends to be pluralistic. That is, we are tied to many different relationships - families, work groups, voluntary associations, religious and other such communities, nations - each of which makes demands on us, and there is no single overarching perspective from which we can order or rank these demands. In case of conflict - say, where I have to decide whether to use my resources to help my brother or my colleague at work - I simply have to weigh their respective claims, reflecting both on the nature of my relationship to the two individuals and on the benefits that each would get from the help I can give. Given a picture of this kind, it is relatively straightforward to include the claim that I owe something to my fellow human beings considered merely as such. The relationships in which I stand vary considerably in their complexity and closeness. There is nothing in particularism which prevents me from recognizing that I stand in some relationship to all other human beings by virtue of our common humanity and our sharing of a single world. The problem is rather to decide on what ethical demands stem from this relationship, and to weigh it against other more specific loyalties.

Despite these conciliatory manoeuvres made to incorporate the moral intuitions appealed to by the other side, there still remains a fundamental gap between ethical universalism and particularism. One way of expressing this, which I shall try to show is misleading, is that universalists believe in ethical impartiality, whereas particularists believe in ethical partiality. This may seem to be an accurate way of describing the contrast because, from a universalist point of view, what the particularist is advocating is naturally referred to as 'favouring your own family' or 'showing preference for your own community', and this appears to be a case of 'showing partiality', whereas 'favouring everyone equally' looks like 'being impartial'. But in fact this is wrong. 'Impartiality' always gains its meaning from a specific context, and it means something like 'applying the rules and criteria appropriate to that context in a uniform way, and in particular without allowing personal prejudice or interest to interfere'. So a judge is being impartial when she applies the rule of law evenly-handedly to the cases that come before her, not taking bribes or allowing racial prejudice, say, to influence her verdicts. But she need be impartial only towards the cases that come before her, and she is not being partial because the rules she applies require her to punish crimes more leniently than the equivalent crimes are punished in some other jurisdiction. Equally, a father may deal impartially with his children, but this doesn't require him to dole out the same treatment to his neighbour's children as he gives to his own.

The ethical particularist is not an advocate of impartiality. He will agree that ethical conduct must be impartial, but he will simply deny that impartiality consists in taking up a universalist perspective. Thus, if I am a member of group G, then I must act towards all the other members of group G in certain ways, and that will require me to be impartial even if I happen to like Elizabeth more than John and so forth. But I am not required to act in the same way towards people who are not members of G, and in refusing them what I would be obliged to give to people who are members, I am not displaying partiality. Partiality (in the morally relevant sense) means treating someone (possibly yourself) favourably in defiance of ethically sanctioned rules and procedures, so we don't know what it consists in until we know what those rules and procedures are in a given case.

Describing the contrast between universalism and particularism in terms of a contrast between impartiality and partiality muddles up a question about the structure of ethics with a different question. This second question has to do with how far ethical demands, however constrained, may justifiably constrain individuals' pursuit of their own projects and goals. Several recent authors, most notably perhaps Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, have explored the conflicts that arise between impersonal morality and what Nagel calls 'the personal standpoint' - the agent's view of himself as someone with particular concerns and interests whose satisfaction is vitally important to him. This may indeed legitimately be presented as a conflict between impartiality and partiality, since what goes into the scales against impartiality is the agent's concern that his own life should go well. It is important to see that the conflict between personal and impersonal standards can be just as severe when 'impartial morality' is construed in particularist terms - for instance, when a person has to choose between pursuing his own ambitions and doing what his profession or his country requires of him. Both Williams and Nagel feel this point to some extent, by thinking of impartiality in universalist terms. So the picture they present is of an agent with his own projects confronted with the demands...
of some global principle such as utility or equality. But the position is really much more complex than that. What constrains the pursuit of individual projects is typically a whole raft of demands and obligations, stemming from someone's commitments, memberships, and allegiances, as well as from the rights or needs of humanity as such. All of these, I have argued, can best be seen as (possibly conflicting) requirements of impartiality.

How, then, should we understand what is at stake in the contest between universalism and particularism in ethical? We can get a better grasp of it by seeing what the universalist will identify as the main weakness in particularism, and conversely what the particularist will regard as the main weakness in universalism. To begin with the first of these, to the universalist, particularism appears as the capitulation of reason before sentiment, prejudice, convention, and other such rationally dubious factors. By allowing existing commitments, relationships, and loyalties to enter our ethical thinking at a basic level, the particularist signals a failure to subject these bonds to rational scrutiny. And this exposes him immediately to two dangers. One is moral conservatism, the sanctification of merely traditional ethical relations, based perhaps on the interests of dominant social groups, on crowned philosophers, or perhaps on sheer ignorance. The other is incoherence, where the ethical demands that stem from relationships of different kinds are not brought into any rational relation with one another, so that a person who follows a particularistic ethics would receive no guidance in cases where he was pulled in one direction by one set of obligations and in the opposite direction by a second set—the position, for instance, of Sartre's young Frenchman (....). Indeed, because different aspects of the situation might appear salient on different occasions, such a person might act inconsistently—and inconsistent behaviour would seem to be the epitome of irrationality.

The ethical universalist aspires instead to a model of the following sort: rational reflection on the foundations of ethics will lead us to a single basic principle, or else to an ordered set of principles, with universal scope—for instance to the principle of utility, or a principle of basic human rights, or some version of the principle of equality. In the light of this basic principle, we will then be able to scrutinize our more specific ethical intuitions (say, about our familial obligations), accepting some, rejecting others, modifying yet others, and assigning them consistent weights to be used in cases of conflict. We would then have something that deserved the name of an ethical system, a set of principles and rules of varying scope that together would guide our conduct consistently, and that could resolve moral dilemmas such as the one described above. Of course, adopting a universalist perspective does not entail discovering such a system—it may turn out that there is simply an irreducible plurality of basic ethical principles—but the idea that we should at least try to devise such a system seems to me to provide a good deal of the motive force behind universalism.

Let me now turn the question around and ask what particularists are likely to see as the main defect of ethical universalism. The answer, I think, is that in two respects at least universalism relies upon an implausible picture of moral agency, of the person who is to be the bearer of responsibilities and duties. It draws a sharp line between moral agency and personal identity on the one hand, and between moral agency and personal motivation on the other. According to the universalist, we discover what our duties are by abstract reflection on the human condition and on what others can legitimately ask of us. When we act morally, we act out of a regard for these purely rational considerations; for instance, having decided that the basis of ethics is the general happiness, we resolve to act according to those rules of conduct that are best calculated to promote that objective. But, the particularist will argue, this involves driving a wedge between ethical duty and personal identity. No considerations about what I am, where I have come from, or which communities I see myself as attached to are to be allowed to influence my ethical reasoning. As Alasdair MacIntyre has put the point, a position of this kind:

requires of me to assume an abstract and artificial—perhaps even an impossible—stance, that of a rational being as such, responding to the requirements of morality not qua parent or farmer or quartzback, but qua rational agent who has abstracted him or herself from all social particularity, who has become not merely Adam Smith's impartial spectator but a correspondingly impartial actor, and one who in his impartiality is doomed to rootlessness, to be a citizen of nowhere. How can I justify to myself performing this act of abstraction and detachment?

Equally, the particularist will claim, universalism rests upon an implausible account of ethical motivation. When I act on moral principle, I am supposed to act simply out of a rational conviction that I am doing what morality requires of me. I am not to be influenced by my sentiments towards the objects of my duty, nor am I to allow the reactions of those around me in my community to guide my behaviour. So, for instance, thoughts such as 'I'd be letting down my family if I did that' or 'This is not how a good Christian should behave' have to be seen as extraneous to ethics proper. But it seems unlikely that rational conviction can carry the weight required of it, except perhaps in the case of a small number of heroic individuals who are genuinely able to govern their lives by considerations of pure principle. For the mass of mankind, ethical life must be a social institution whose principles must accommodate natural sentiments towards relatives, colleagues, and so forth, and which must rely on a complex set of motives to get people to comply with its requirements—motives such as love, pride, and shame as well as purely rational conviction.

II

These arguments and counter-arguments could be spelled out at much greater length than is possible here, but my aim has simply been to identify what is at stake in the contest between universalism and particularism in ethics. The universalist sees in particularism a failure of rationality; the particularist sees in universalism a commitment to abstract rationality that exceeds the capacities of ordinary human beings. These are the main charges that each side has to rebut if it is to provide a convincing account of ethical life. So let us now turn our attention back to nationality and ask about its ethical significance. It should be clear from what has been said that national allegiances could have intrinsic significance only if we adopt some form of ethical particularism. If we begin from a universalist position, then the fact that Elizabeth is my countrywoman cannot justify my having special obligations towards her at the basic level. On the other hand, it is not so clear that nationality must be devoid of ethical significance at a less basic level. Perhaps special obligations to compatriots can be derived by universalists in one of the ways in which they seek to derive limited obligations generally. So let us see how an ethical universalist might try to do this.

In this investigation we must guard against one possible source of confusion. We have on the one hand groups of people who share a national identity... On the
other hand we have people who are involved in common schemes of political co-operation, in the sense that they are subject to the same set of laws, contribute to one another's welfare through schemes of taxation, and so forth; the most familiar case is those who are citizens of the same state. Now of course relationships of these two kinds may coincide, as they do when we have genuine nation-states in which all citizens share a common nationality. But equally, as we have already seen, there can be groups of compar- tions who are not (now) involved in common schemes of political co-operation (e.g. are citizens of different states), and people may share a common citizenship even though they are the bearers of separate national identifications. So we need to be clear whether we are trying to assess the ethical significance of nationality as such, or instead the ethical sig- nificance of membership in a scheme of political co-operation. The importance of this will shortly be apparent.

How, then, might an ethical universalist try to justify special obligations among com- patriots? We have seen that there are two broad strategies that he might follow. Con- sider first the 'voluntary creation' strategy. This would seek to portray a nation as a voluntary association which someone might choose to join, and would argue that the special rights and obligations attached to nationality are justified in roughly the same way as the rights and obligations of more immediate associations such as families and sports clubs. Such an argument runs into difficulties immediately. We have seen already how misleading it is to suppose that nationality could be interpreted on the model of a voluntary association. Bearing a national identity means seeing oneself as part of a historic community which in part makes one the person that one is: to regard membership as something one has chosen is to give way to an untenable form of social atomism which first abstracts the individual from his or her social relationships and then supposes that those relationships can be explained as the voluntary choices of the individual thus abstracted. Now admittedly, it is possible to renounce one's nationality, in the sense of removing oneself from the society in question, making no further claims against it, and acknowledging no further obligations. But for this renuncia- tion to be genuine, one or other identity - the person's or the nation's - must have changed in such a radical way that the person in question could no longer see him- self as a member of that nation - the position, for instance, of a Jew in Hitler's Germany. The fact that in certain circum- stances membership must be renounced does not make continuing acknowledge- ment of one's nationality a matter of volun- tary choice. Even if this difficulty could be surmounted, there would be the further question whether nations qua voluntary associations are the kind of things one could legitimately join according to universalist principles. What, positively, are the moral gains, or the gains in personal welfare, that flow from member- ship of large agglomerations of people such as nations usually are? It is very difficult to see how the arguments deployed by universalists to justify obligation-creating practices such as promises and contracts which involve small numbers of individuals could be extended to these more extensive communities. And indeed, if we look at the arguments actually used by universalists in this area, we find that they are targeted not on nations as such but on schemes of politi- cal co-operation, or, more specifically, states. The argument we actually try to justify are the special rights and obligations one has as citizen of this or that state.

To take a familiar instance of this argu- ment, assume that our universal obligation is to secure the basic rights of everyone - rights to life, liberty, and so forth. Suppose that we are the subjects of a state which fulfills this duty reasonably effectively in the case of its own members, and does not actively violate the rights of outsiders. Then it may be claimed that we may discharge our indi- vidual obligations by supporting the state to which we belong. We have contracted into a scheme of co-operation which can be justified in terms that the universalist accepts, and so we ought properly to acknowledge the special responsibilities that we incur under the scheme.

This approach still has to face the problem involved in viewing the state as a voluntary association. States demand the allegiance of their subjects; the long history of attempts to show that, appearances notwithstanding, each of these subjects has actually consented to membership of the state reveals the nature of the problem. It may be circumvented, however, by regarding political co-operation not as a voluntary matter in the strict sense but as quasi-contractual in nature. Here the emphasis is placed not on consent but on the mutual exchange of benefits. My obligations to the state and to my fellow-citizens derive from our common participation in a prac- tice from which all may expect to benefit. The appeal here is to a principle of fair play which does not require that I should have made a voluntary decision to join the prac- tice. Now this principle has an important role to play in our understanding of the obli- gations of nationality, as I shall show in due course. But it cannot bear all the weight that it is being asked to bear here.

Observe that the quasi-contractual approach to limited obligations proceeds entirely by appeal to existing practices. Because, as a matter of fact, I am part of an on-going scheme of co-operation from which I derive benefits, I have an obligation to contribute to the scheme as its rules require. The fair play principle lays down some condition on the kind of scheme that will generate obligations in this way - for instance, it cannot operate in such a way that one group of participants exploits another group by receiving a disproportionate share of the benefits - but it does not provide positive reasons for having such a scheme, or for preferring one such scheme to an alternative with a wider or a narrower membership. So, although it may show why individuals derive obligations from their participation in the state, it cannot show why this kind of prac- tice is preferable to one that has a universal, or for that matter a much narrower, scope.

Putting this another way, the quasi-con- contractual approach only generates condi- tional obligations. It says that, if you are the beneficiary of a scheme of political co- operation, you should do your fair share to sustain the scheme. But it does nothing to show why such schemes should exist. It does not show that it is desirable for there to be such things as states; it only shows that, where they do exist, people may have special obligations as a result. And equally, of course, it has nothing to say about the ethical signifi- cance of nationality. It attaches no weight to the fact that we feel a sense of common iden- tity with this group of people rather than that. It is interested only in the fact of co- operation, regardless of whether this is based on a shared national identity or upon the mere contingency of being thrown together (metaphorically or actually) in a lifeboat.

However one tries to spell it out, the 'voluntary creation' approach to special obliga- tions is not going to endow nationality with ethical significance (nor, indeed, will it even strongly justify the existence of states). What about the second strategy available to universalists, the 'useful convention' approach? This side-steps all the problems of consent and voluntariness, for there is no implication that useful conventions must be ones that have emerged by free agreement. But it faces the same difficulty in explaining why any significance should attach to national boundaries as such.
Consider one example of this approach. Goodman writes: "Special responsibilities are, on my account, assigned merely as an administrative device for discharging our general duties more efficiently." To illustrate this account, he takes the case of a swimmer drowning off a beach that has an official lifeguard. To avoid chaos in the water, we need to be able to assign to someone the responsibility of rescuing the swimmer, and since the lifeguard is the designated person, the duty falls in the first place on him. This is a convenient example of the way in which a duty borne by everyone—the duty to save life—can be assigned to a particular case to a specific person. But notice how the example works. First, there is a social convention— the appointment of an official lifeguard—which means that we can all recognize who bears the duty in this case. But the assignment is not purely arbitrary. The lifeguard will have been selected because he is a strong swimmer, and will have been trained in life-saving techniques. So we all have good reason to think that the object of our duty—saving the swimmer—will be served best by our getting out of the lifeguard's way and letting him perform the rescue.

Now compare the case of obligations to contemporaries as a way of discharging our general duties to humanity. Here again we find a convention whereby each state is held responsible for protecting the rights and serving the welfare of its own citizens. Although there is no act of assignment, as there has been in the case of the lifeguard, the convention in question seems to be universally recognized. But does this convention ensure that those who are assigned responsibility for each portion of humanity are the most competent to undertake that task? Why does it make sense to assign responsibility for the rights and welfare of Swedes to other Swedes and the rights and welfare of Somalis to other Somalis, if we are looking at the question from a global perspective? What is the equivalent here to the selection and training of the lifeguard?

Two bad answers to this question are physical proximity and administrative ease. Neither of these has any intrinsic connection with nationality. Physical proximity suggests taking responsibility for those in your locality regardless of their nationality. Administrative ease brings us back once again to states, as the institutions that are currently most effective in protecting rights and delivering welfare, but it provides no answer to such questions as "Why should the boundaries of states be located here rather than there?" "Why not have sub-national or supra-national units performing these tasks?" A better answer is that cultural similarities mean that co-nationals are better informed about one another than they are about outsiders, and therefore better placed to say, for example, when their fellow citizens are in need, or are deprived of their rights. This, I think, is the strongest argument that can be given from a universalist point of view, for acknowledging special obligations to contemporaries. But it confronts an argument in the opposite direction which is at least as powerful. Nations are hugely unequal in their capacity to provide for their own members. In so far as the obligations we are considering include the obligation to provide for human needs up to a certain point, it would seem odd to put the well off in charge of the well off and the badly off in charge of the badly off. Simple co-ordination rules like "help the person standing next to you" make sense when, as far as we know, each is equally in need of help, and each equally able to provide it. But the international picture is very different from this. To put Swedes, with a per capita annual income of $24,000, in charge of their own needy, and Somalis, with a per capita annual income of $120, in charge of their needy would seem grossly irrational from a universal standpoint. As Shue has argued, if we want to devise a reasonable institutional scheme to link together right-holders and duty-bearers, ability to pay would seem the natural way of assigning the duties.¹⁵ I conclude, therefore, that attempts to justify the principle of nationality from the perspective of ethical universalism are doomed to failure. The consistent universalist should regard nationality not as a justifiable source of ethical identity but as a limitation to be overcome. Nationality should be looked upon as a sentiment that may have certain uses in the short term—given the weakness of people's attachment to universal principles—but which, in the long term, should be transcended in the name of humanity. Thus, Svidwick, representing the utilitarian school of universalism, contrasted the national ideal with the cosmopolitan ideal. The latter was 'the ideal of the future', but to apply it now 'allows too little for the national and patriotic sentiments which have in any case to be reckoned with as an actually powerful political force, and which appear to be at present indispensable to social well-being. We cannot yet hope to substitute for these sentiments, in sufficient diffusion and intensity, the wider sentiment connected with the conception of our common humanity.' Here is a consistent universalist, not trying per impossibile to demonstrate the moral worth of nationality, but arguing that practical ethics must, for the foreseeable future, bow to the force of national sentiments.

Nothing I have said so far is intended as a critique of universalism in itself. A universalist approach to ethics might still be the correct one. What I have been trying to dispel is the comforting thought that one can embrace universalism in ethics while continuing to give priority to one's contemporaries in one's practical reasoning. The choice, as I see it, is either to adopt a more heroic version of universalism, which attaches no intrinsic significance to national boundaries, or else to embrace ethical particularism and see whether one can defend oneself against the charge that one is succumbing to irrational sentiment in giving weight to national allegiances.

III

The particularist defence of nationality begins with the assumption that memberships and attachments in general have ethical significance. Because I identify with my family, my college, or my local community, I properly acknowledge obligations to members of these groups that are distinct from the obligations I owe to people generally. Seeing myself as a member, I feel a loyalty to the group, and this expresses itself, among other things, in my giving special weight to the interests of fellow-members. So, if my time is restricted and two students seek advice, I give priority to the one who belongs to my college.¹⁷ These loyalties, and the obligations that go with them, are seen as mutual. I expect other members to give special weight to my interests in the same way as I give special weight to theirs. This doesn't mean that the relationship is one of strict reciprocity. For various reasons it may not be possible for the person whose interests I promote to return the favour in kind; the student I advise is not likely to be in the position to offer help of a different sort, and then I expect her to weight my interests in the same way as I weight hers. If this mutuality fails—not in a particular case, but in general—the character of the group or community to which I think I belong is put in question. Perhaps I have the romantic belief that my college is an academic community, whereas in fact it is simply an agglomeration of self-interested individuals using the institution to advance
their careers. It is important that the obligations I acknowledge may be either appropriate or inappropriate as the case may be, depending on the relationships that really obtain within the group in question.

The obligations that I should acknowledge in a case like this are likely to be coloured by the general ethos of the group or community. This will determine, to some degree at least, the interests that I can be called on to promote. The college example that I used above traded to some extent on the fact that a college is an academic institution, so that giving academic advice is a paradigm of the sort of act that I can be called on to perform. But if this point is pushed too far, we are in danger of reducing communities of all kinds to instrumental associations. My collegial obligations extend to general human interests, so that if there are two students who need to be driven urgently to hospital, and I can take only one, then again, I ought to give priority to the one who belongs to my college, taking the other only if his need is considerably more urgent. But the interests are interpreted in the light of the community’s values. A good example is provided by the medieval Jewish communities described by Michael Walzer. Members of these communities recognized an obligation to provide for one another’s needs, but needs in turn were understood in relation to religious ideals; this meant, for instance, that education was seen as a need for boys but not for girls; that food was distributed to the poorest members of the communities on the eve of the religious festivals; and so forth.

Before going on to see whether this picture of the ethics of community can plausibly be extended to nations, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the motivational strengths of ethical ties of this kind. First, to the extent that I really do identify with the group or community in question, there need be no sharp conflict between fulfilling my obligations and pursuing my own goals and purposes. The group’s interests are among the goals that I set myself to advance; they may be of course conflict with other goals that are equally important to me, but we are far away from the position where an individual with essentially private aims and purposes has to balance against the obligations of a universalist morality such as utilitarianism.

In that position there would almost always be a simple trade-off: the more a person does what morality requires of him, the less scope he has to pursue his personal goals. If this were indeed a correct picture of ethical life, one might be forgiven for thinking that morality would have rather little motivational power. But when I see my own welfare as bound up with the community to which I belong, contributing towards it is also a form of goal-fulfilment.

Second, because of the loose reciprocity that characterizes the ethics of community, a person who acts to aid some other member of his group can be sustained by the thought that in different circumstances he might expect to be the beneficiary of the relationship. I do not mean to suggest that such a person will act in order to receive some future benefit. From a self-interested point of view, it may be irrational to assume such an obligation, because it may be clear enough that the expected benefits are smaller than the expected costs. The point is a weaker one: the act of making a contribution is not a pure loss, from the point of view of the private interests of the person making it, because he is helping to sustain a set of relationships from which he stands to benefit to some degree. The point again is not that particularistic relationships serve to eradicate conflict between an individual’s interests and the interests of others in the group or community, but that they soften the conflict so that ethical behaviour becomes easier for imperfectly altruistic agents.

Finally, we should observe that groups and communities form natural sites on which more formal systems of reciprocity can establish themselves. They mark out sets of people who are already well disposed to one another in certain respects, and this makes it easier to create formal practices for mutual benefit. Thus, a group of neighbours may decide to form a shopping collective or share a school run. These practices are likely to be governed by tighter norms of reciprocity, in the sense that each person will have equal responsibilities and these will be more formally defined — it will be my job to visit the warehouse on the third Saturday of every month, say. When practices of this kind emerge, their effect will be to reinforce the less formal bonds that constituted the community in the first place, and to blur still further the contrast between a person’s interests and her communal obligations.

How far, then, can these arguments be applied to nations? Does it make sense to regard nations as communities which generate rights and obligations in the same way as communities of a more immediate sort? Can the particularistic arguments I have been deploying serve to defend obligations to compatriots? In the last chapter I tried to bring out the various features that distinguish nations qua communities from communities of a more direct and immediate kind, and I want now to explore the ethical implications of this in somewhat greater depth.

Nationality, as I have argued already, is a powerful source of personal identity; but paradoxically, it is strangely amorphous when we come to ask about the rights and obligations that flow from it. It is capable of evoking fierce, and indeed often supranational, loyalty, manifested in people’s willingness to give up their lives for their country; but if we were to ask those who share this loyalty what precisely their obligations consist in, we would I think receive answers that were very vague. People would no doubt say, first of all, that they had a duty to defend their nation and its ancestral territory, in other words to preserve the community’s culture and its physical integrity. They would also say that they bore a special responsibility towards their fellow-nationals, that they were justified in giving them priority both when acting as individuals and when deciding upon public policy. But if asked to be more specific about the content of these special responsibilities, it would be hard to dictate any determinate general answer.

This reminds us of the abstract character of nationality, its quality of imagined community. Whereas in face-to-face communities, especially perhaps those with defined objectives, there is a clear understanding of what each is expected to contribute towards the welfare of other members, in the case of nationality we are in no position to grasp the demands and expectations of other members directly, nor they ours. Into this vacuum there flows what I have called a public culture, a set of ideas about the character of the community which also helps to fix responsibilities. This public culture is to some extent a product of political debate, and depends for its dissemination upon mass media. (This will be particularly true, of course, where the nation in question has its own state, or equivalent system of political authority.) It will therefore have an ideological coloring. Some national cultures may attach value to individual self-sufficiency, for example, and will therefore construe their members’ obligations to one another mainly in terms of providing the conditions under which individuals can fashion their own lives; others will lay greater stress on collective goods, and regard compatriots as having duties to involve themselves in various forms of national service, to enhance the literary and artistic heritage of the nation, and so forth. So, although at any time it may be possible to say roughly what the obligations of the members of nation A are, these obligations in their particular...
content are artefacts of the public culture of that nation. Now this may at first sight appear a very unsatisfactory conclusion to reach. We set out to show that particular ethical obligations could legitimately be derived from membership in a national community. Normally we would expect such obligations to be independently derived, and to serve as reasons in the process of political decision-making. For instance, we might appeal to obligations to provide welfare in the course of advocating policies or institutions that would serve to meet the needs, for instance the medical needs, of fellow-nationals. But it turns out that the obligations themselves stem from a public culture that has been shaped by political debate in the past. But although this shows that we cannot derive the obligations of nationality simply from reflection on what it means for a group of people to constitute a nation in the first place, we should not exaggerate the significance of this point. It certainly does not imply that my obligations qua member of nation A are merely whatever I take them to be. The culture in question is a public phenomenon: any one individual may interpret it rightly or wrongly, and draw correct or incorrect conclusions about his obligations to comrades as a result. Moreover, although the public culture is shaped by political debate, this does not mean that it is easily manipulable by political actors in the short term. It is often quite resilient: a relevant example is the failure of the British Conservative Party under Mrs Thatcher to bring about any across-the-board changes in national culture, despite holding the reins of government for eleven years. Because of this relative stability, the idea that the public culture can serve as a source of ideas that may then be used to justify or criticize the policies of a particular government remains valid.

The fact that the public culture, and the obligations of nationality that derive from it, can be reshaped over time has a welcome consequence. I said that one main charge levelled against all forms of ethical particularism is that they amount to the sanctification of merely traditional ethical relations. To the extent that national identities, and the public cultures that help to compose them, are shaped by processes of rational reflection to which members of the community can contribute on an equal footing, this charge no longer applies. The obligations that we now acknowledge are not merely traditional, but will bear the imprint of the various reasons that have been offered over time in the course of these debates. Thus, if, in a democratic community I have an obligation to support a national health service, that obligation is grounded in the reasons given for having the health service when it was first introduced, and reaffirmed from time to time when the health service is debated. If I may not know these reasons myself, and may simply take it for granted that supporting a national health service is part of what we believe in round here; none the less, the point remains that the obligations have a grounding in something more than mere tradition. How far this ideal condition is met will depend on the political institutions we have, the quality of political debate both within the formal institutions and outside them, the general level of education, and so forth. These are matters that I shall return to later, when I discuss the ideal of national self-determination.

I have so far claimed that the ethical implications of nationality differ from those of lesser communities in two main respects. The potency of nationality as a source of personal identity means that its obligations are strongly felt and may extend very far—people are willing to sacrifice themselves for their country in a way that they are not for other groups and associations. But at the same time, these obligations are somewhat indeterminate and likely to be the subject of political debate. In the best case, they will flow from a shared public culture which results from rational deliberation over time about what it means to belong to the nation in question. However, to grasp the full force of the obligations of nationality, we need to consider what happens when national boundaries coincide with state boundaries, so that a formal scheme of political cooperation is superimposed on the national community.

In this case people will have rights and obligations of citizenship as well as rights and obligations of nationality. Rights and obligations of the first kind stem simply from their participation in a practice from which they stand to benefit, via the principle of reciprocity. As citizens they enjoy rights of personal protection, welfare rights, and so forth, and in return they have an obligation to keep the law, to pay taxes, and generally to uphold the co-operative scheme. To a very large extent, their obligations of nationality are discharged through the state, provided that the latter pursues the right kind of policies. And this has the immediate advantage that people can play their part in the scheme in the knowledge that most others will (if necessary) be compelled to play theirs. Whereas in small communities each member can see for himself whether others are carrying out their obligations or not, in a nation-state we have to rely on the presence of enforcement mechanisms to get that assurance. It would, however, be a great mistake to suppose that, once a practice of political cooperation is in place, nationality drops out of the picture as an irrelevance—that we simply have the rights and obligations of citizens interacting with other citizens. The bonds of nationality give the practice a different shape from the one that it would have without them. Let us try to imagine how the rights and obligations of citizenship might look if the citizens were tied to one another by nothing beyond the practice of citizenship itself, and were motivated by the principle of fairness. They would insist on strict reciprocity. In other words, each would expect to benefit from their association in proportion to his or her contribution, taking as a baseline the hypothetical state of affairs in which there was no political co-operation between them. So, for instance, redistributive taxation would be agreed to only in circumstances in which each person thought it was neutral to insure him- or herself through the state against the possibility of falling below a certain level of resources. Given the possibility of private insurance, we would expect states that lacked a communitarian background such as nationality provides to be little more than minimal states, providing only basic security to their members. In particular, it is difficult to explain why states should provide opportunities and resources to people with permanent handicaps if one is simply following the logic of reciprocity. It is because we have prior obligations of nationality that include obligations to provide for needs that arise in this way that the practice of citizenship properly includes redistributive elements of the kind that we commonly find in contemporary states. It may be asked how this analysis squares with the fact that citizenship is frequently extended to residents of the state who acknowledge a different nationality from the majority. Although it is possible to devise two categories of citizenship in these circumstances—e.g. by classifying non-nationals as 'guest workers'—there are strong reasons for extending a single common citizenship to everyone who is subject to the authority of the same state. When this happens, most citizens will find that their obligations of citizenship based on reciprocity are backed up by obligations stemming from common nationality; but some will not. Such a state of affairs may well be tolerated, particularly if the number of non-
nations is fairly small, but it is potentially unstable. The instability might be resolved either by slimming down the obligations of citizenship—turning the state into something closer to a minimal state—or by making state and nation coincide more closely. If the latter option is pursued, there are again two alternatives: to try to assimilate the non-nationals so that they come to share in a common national identity, or to partition the state in such a way that the new political units are more exactly isomorphic with national divisions [...] The point that I want to underline here is that there are strong ethical reasons for making the bounds of nationality and the bounds of the state coincide. Where this obtains, obligations of nationality are strengthened by being given expression in a formal scheme of political co-operation, and the scheme of co-operation can be based on loose rather than strict reciprocity, meaning that redistributive elements can be built in which go beyond what the national self-interest of each participant would dictate.

IV

The particularistic defence of nationality that I have been building up might seem convincing in its own terms, but the universalist will want to ask whether there are not also obligations to human beings as such, and if so how they can be reconciled with the picture so far presented. Does the ethics of nationality entail moral indifference to outsiders? Here it is important to begin by recognizing that, when we talk about outsiders, we are not talking about isolated individuals, but about people who are themselves members of national communities. Of course there are exceptions to this—stateless persons, or refugees who for good reasons can no longer embrace their past national identity. But in general, in considering relations to outsiders, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that our only relationship to them is of one human being to another. We are certainly related in that way, but, in considering my ethical relationship to, say, a Tanzanian, I should not forget that we are also related as Briton to Tanzanian. Each of us is linked internally to our own national community, and this creates a second dimension to our relationship alongside the first, which complicates the ethical picture.

If we consider just the first dimension, then the obligations that it imposes are probably best captured by a theory of basic rights. These are generic conditions for living a decent life which can be expressed in terms of rights to bodily integrity, personal freedom, a minimum level of resources, and so forth. We have obligations to respect these rights in others that derive simply from our common humanity; mostly these are positive rights to forbearance of various kinds—rights to be left alone, not to be injured in various ways, etc. —but they may also include rights to provision, for example in cases where a natural shortage of resources means that people will starve or suffer bodily injury if others do not provide for them.

So much is relatively commonplace; nearly all ethical universalists would wish to endorse such a list of rights and their corresponding obligations, though many would argue that our responsibilities to other human beings go somewhat further than this. And I can see no reason why those who hold particularist views should not also endorse such a list of basic rights. The divergence occurs when we juxtapose relationships between persons abstractly conceived with relationships between persons as members of communities, including national communities. For now the basic rights and the obligations that correspond to them are overlain by the special responsibilities that we have as members of these communities. Moreover, in each such community there will be a specific understanding of the needs and interests of members which generate obligations on the part of other members. I argued above that a community will embody a common ethos which enters into the definition of the needs and interests that count for these purposes in the case of nations, this common ethos takes the form of a public culture. Thus, in one national community (the Republic of Ireland, for example) religious education may be regarded as a shared need which should properly be funded by the community as a whole, whereas in another (the United States for example) it may be seen as a private matter which should be left to each person to consider, and to provide for their children as they saw fit. Given that there is a limit to the resources available in any given community to meet these commonly recognized needs, conflicts may then arise in any of the following three ways.

First, there may be a simple conflict between providing for the needs people have as members of a national community and respecting the basic rights of outsiders, to the extent that the latter involves some form of positive provision. For example, given that there is no obvious limit to the quantity of resources that might be expended in providing for health needs, how should we weigh the demands of the domestic national health service against the costs of immunization programmes in other countries? Considerations of urgency point in one direction; the relative strength of our obligations to different groups of people points in the other. No simple doctrine of 'basic rights first' seems acceptable in such cases.

Second, it may turn out that our own understanding of basic rights, coloured as it will undoubtedly be by the ethos of our own community, conflicts in certain respects with the priorities attached to various needs in other communities. We might see formal education as a basic right; but there may be communities in which this is regarded as disruptive of cultural bonds and therefore as not, ultimately, in the best interests of the individuals concerned. In these circumstances, do we have obligations to promote basic rights as we see them, or should we rather give priority to community-based conceptions of need which we do not ourselves share?

Although these first two points seem to me quite powerful, they do not by themselves challenge a universal obligation to protect basic rights at a sufficiently fundamental level — to protect people from death by starvation. At this level we should expect conceptions of need to converge, and, provided the cost of protecting these basic needs is relatively small, it would be difficult to argue that the obligation must always yield to the demands of justice within the national community. But the third point cuts deeper still. Who has the obligation to protect these basic rights? Given what has been said so far about the role of shared identities in generating obligations, we must suppose that it falls in the first place on the national and smaller local communities to which the rights-bearers belong. So why should we, as outsiders, have obligations to provide resources which ought to be provided in each case by fellow-nationals and/or local communities and other such groups?

The only answer that can be given here is that the rights will not be effectively protected unless there is provision across national boundaries. But again, we must ask why this should be the case. The most compelling argument for international provision is that it is simply impossible for the national community in question to protect the basic rights of its members — say, because of resource shortages caused by drought or flooding. In these circumstances we can say
that there is a general obligation, falling equally on all those in a position to provide aid, to step in and safeguard the basic rights of those threatened by famine.\cite{27} But if we take 'impossible' literally, this case is prob-
bly quite rare. Much more often, nations cannot protect the basic rights of their mem-
bers because of other decisions they have taken: famines may result from mis-
guided economic decisions made in the past, and they may be perpetuated by the institutional rules that continue to be applied.\cite{28} Or again, the cause may simply be the unwillingness of better off people in the society in question to make the changes that would secure the rights of the worst off, for instance to introduce publicly funded welfare schemes.\cite{29} What then follows for the obligations of outsiders?

Consider the general case in which B has a general right, primary responsibility for respecting which falls upon A (through some process of assignment), who fails to discharge his obligation. What responsibility does some third party, C, then have? We do not automatically conclude that C should herself provide what is needed to satisfy B's right. Her first obligation is surely to try to get A to acknowledge his responsibility, by persuasion if possible, but failing this by such force as is commensurate with the right in question. If these approaches fail, then at some point we will probably say that C should take care of B herself, though the obligation to do so would be weaker than A's original obligation. If we translate this pattern of reasoning to the international arena, then, if nation A fails to protect the rights of a set of its members, B, the obligation of nation C is first of all to use all rea-
sonable means to induce A to protect the rights of B. This might involve, for instance, trying to public condemnation to shame policy-makers in A to respect these rights, threatening to sever ties or withdraw military co-operation unless the policy is changed, and in the last resort attempting directly to remove from power those respon-
sible for the policies leading to the right violations.

Measures such as this would be widely regarded as compromising the self-deter-
mination of the nation in question, and yet that reason as unacceptable. This dem-
strates the incompatibility in holding together two principles which are indeed held together by liberals: one attaches value to national self-determination and argues that nations have no right to interfere in one another's domestic affairs (except perhaps in very extreme cases); the other holds that we have a positive obligation to protect the basic rights of our fellow human beings. My point is that acceptance of the first principle places severe limits on the scope of the second. For if the obligation in question falls first of all on fellow-nationals, and if consid-
eries are prohibited by the first principle from intervening in a heavy-handed way when this obligation fails to be discharged, then it seems that they can at most have a weak obligation to provide the necessary resources themselves. If C is prohibited from compel-
ling A to discharge his obligation to B when A defaults, C cannot then be placed under an equally strong obligation to fulfill B's rights.\cite{30}

To put this point another way, I believe that ethical universalists who believe in a duty to protect basic rights of the kind I have been discussing - and, even more so, those who believe in a general utilitarian duty to promote the welfare of fellow human beings - ought to take seriously the case for benevo-
 lent imperialism. Given that many existing states signally fail to protect the basic rights of their members, and given also that on universalist grounds we can attach no intrin-
sic value to the obligations of communities to or national self-determination, why not subject the members of these states to a binding rule of outsiders? Of course in most cases this proposal would not be practicable because of local resistance, but (again in universalist terms) such resistance must be seen as mis-
guided if we allow that the imperialism is benevolent.\cite{31} Why make a fetish of self-
government if your basic rights will be better protected by outsiders? That few of those who now write as universalists are prepared to draw such conclusions shows, I think, that, while they are often ready to condemn their own countrymen as blinkered for their attachment to the idea of nationality, they are not prepared to pass the same judgement on outsiders.\cite{32}

There is an appealing compromise between ethical universalism and ethical particularism which holds that it is justifiable to act on special loyalties and recognize special obligations to compatriots provided that this does not involve violating the basic rights of outsiders.\cite{33} Basic rights come first; so long as they are respected, it is ethically acceptable to give preference to the needs and interests of fellow-countrymen (and to members of other such communities). Unfortunately, this position turns out to be too simple. At the very least, we need to draw a distinction between violating basic rights by one's own actions, and allowing them to be violated by others. It is probably true that the ethical claims of nationality could not justify anyone in violating the rights of an outsider by, say, killing or injuring him.\cite{34} But if we take nationality seriously, then we must also accept that positive obligations to protect basic rights (e.g. to relieve hunger) fall in the first place on co-nationals, so that outsiders would have strong obligations in this respect only where it was strictly impos-
sible for the rights to be protected within the national community. If dualist policies or vested humanitarian interests in nation A mean that some of its citizens go needy, then, if nation C decides that its own welfare requirements mean that it cannot afford to give much (or anything) to the needy in A, it has not directly violated their rights at most, it has permitted them to be violated, and in the circumstances this may be justifiable.

Yet ... So my account of the ethics of nationality is not yet fully executed. But since the argumentative strategy of this chapter has been a little oblique, let me conclude here by reiterating its main steps. I began by distinguishing between ethical universalism and ethical particularism. I then argued that neither of the two appro-
aches commonly used by universalists to justify special loyalties and duties - I call them the "useful convention" and "volun-
tary creation" approaches - stood much chance of accounting for commonly recog-
nized obligations to fellow-nationals. The consistent ethical universalist ought to be a cosmopolitan. I then presented a justifying account of particularism, pointing out that, where obligations spring from communal relations, the opposition between self-
interest and ethical obligation is diminished. I drew particular attention to the way in which communities can support formal practices of reciprocity in such a way that each reinforces the obligations deriving from the other. A nation-state in which a formal scheme of political co-operation is superimposed on a national community is a paradigmatic example of this. Finally, I asked whether ethical particularism of the kind defended here is compatible with the recognition of universal human rights. The answer is affirmative, but the obligations corresponding to these rights turn out to be attributed primarily to co-nationals. One corollary of this is that we are not in most cases required by justice to intervene to safeguard the human rights of foreigners, though humanitarian considerations may lead us to do so.

This argument is something less than a frontal attack on ethical universalism, which would carry us far away from the main focus of my book. My aim has been the more
modest one of showing that the ethics of nationality is plausible, resting as it does on well established facts about human identity and human motivation. Theonus is on the universalist to show that, in widening the scope of ethical ties to encompass equally the whole of the human species, he does not also drain them of their binding force.

Notes

1 Alternatively, members of either camp may try to tough it out, holding on to simple and rigorous forms of universalism and particularism respectively. The best example of a tough-minded universalist is perhaps William Godwin, well known for his rejection of special relationships of all kinds, including family relationships, as carrying any ethical weight. On the other side, one could cite extreme forms of particularism such as that advocated by Hutch, in which the nation is presented as the supreme object of loyalty and duty.

2 This avenue is followed in R. Goodin, Protecting the Vulnerable (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially chs. 6–5. Goodin assigns duties to B according to how far the interests of others are vulnerable to his choices. 'If A's interests are vulnerable to B's actions and choices, B has a special responsibility to protect A's interests: the strength of the responsibility depends strictly upon the degree to which B can affect A's interests' (p. 118).

3 This is the line of argument used by Peter Singer to explain special responsibilities in 'Reconsidering the Familiar Relief Argument', in P. G. Brown and H. Shue (eds.), Food Policy (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 44.


5 At least, this is the meaning of impartiality in its morally relevant sense. There may perhaps also be a more subtly neutral sense in which any discrimination in the way that I treat people can be called partiality.


7 The argument here runs parallel to that made in A. Oldenquist, 'Loyalties', Journal of Philosophy 79 (1982), pp. 173–93. Oldenquist argues that the demand for 'impartiality' always in reality amounts to the demand that we should consider equally the interests of a wider 'tribe' of people than the present objects of our concern.


9 This point is made in criticism of Williams in J. Maclntyre, 'The Magic in the Pronoun 'My', in T. H. V. Eds. (1984), pp. 113–25. It bears especially upon Williams's discussion in 'Persons, Character and Morality', and it may be worth adding that, in providing a general characterization of ethics in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London: Fontana, 1985), Williams makes it very clear that he does not identify the ethical standpoint with universalism. Nagel is also somewhat inconsistent on this question: when explaining the general distinction between impartiality and partiality, he treats national solidarity as a form of partiality, but in other places he focuses on the tension between the pursuit of private interests and the responsibilities of people to other members of their political community as an instance of the conflict between personal and impersonal standpoints.


11 One way of putting this is to say that the view of ethics invoked by particularism is Human rather than Kantian. Hume saw that morality had to be understood in relation to natural sentiments, so that the judgments we make about others must reflect their (and our) natural preferences for kinship and association. When experience has once given us a competent knowledge of human affairs, and has taught us the proportion they bear to human passion, we perceive, that the ge- nerosity of men is very limited, and that it seldom extends beyond their friends and family, or, at most, beyond their native country. Being thus acquainted with the nature of man, we expect not any impossibilities from him; but confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgement of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be servile and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connection with him' (D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. A. L. S. Koly, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 602. I have discussed Hume's account of morality more extensively in D. Miller, Philosophy and Morality in Hume's Political Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), especially chs. 2 and 5.


14 Figures for 1990 are from World Table 1993 (Balham, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).


16 H. Sidewick, The Elements of Political, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 308. Sidewick's position has more recently been reasserted in C. Belts, Cosmopolitan Ideals and National Sentiments, Journal of Philos- ophy 80 (1983), pp. 591–600. But compare the tougher-minded utilitarian universalism of Peter Singer: 'Sentiments like love, affection and community feeling are a large part of what makes life worthwhile. But sentiments are likely to lead us away from moral reasoning, seducing us into accepting positions that are based, not on an impartial consideration of the interests of all involved, but rather on our own likes and dislikes' ('Reconsidering the Familiar Relief Argument', p. 43).

17 I am supposing that I have no formal responsibilities to either student; they just happen to be working on a subject where I am able to give them some guidance. I am not suggesting that obligations of membership should always take precedence over formally assigned or contractual obligations to outsiders.


19 I don't mean to suggest that communities are a necessary condition for mutual benefit practices to appear. If any set of individuals is so placed that there is mutual advantage to be gained by establishing a co-operative practice, there is some chance that the practice will emerge. But often there is a problem in deciding who should be included in the scope of the practice, and there may be set-up costs that no individual is willing to incur alone. (I have looked at this issue in some depth in D. Miller, 'Public Goods without the State', Critical Review 7 (1993), pp. 505–25.) In any case, the present point is not as much that communities facilitate mutual benefit practices as that, where they have this effect, the members' motivational ties to the group are reinforced.


21 As will be apparent, I am here describing citizenship in a well functioning liberal democracy. For discussion of the circumstances under which the fair-prize principle can generate obligations to the state, see Klosko, Principle of Fairness, especially chs. 2–4.
Why not assume a higher degree of altruism? If we do this, we face the problem of explaining why altruistic concerns should be directed towards one's fellow-citizens, rather than towards those who are neediest regardless of their citizenship. As I noted above, the only plausible argument here is one that appeals to our superior knowledge of the needs of our fellow citizens. To show why citizens who were not linked by bonds of nationality should agree to compulsory redistribution among themselves, we would need to show (a) that they had sufficient general altruism, but also (b) that they had good reason to think that their altruism was best directed towards their fellow-citizens to whom, to repeat, they had no special ties beyond the institutions of common citizenship.

This point emerges clearly in Brian Barry's analysis of the idea of reciprocity in his Democracy, Power and Justice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), although it is somewhat overlooked in his later paper in the same volume, "The Continuing Relevance of Socialism".

A comparison between Canada and the USA might seem to rebut this claim: the USA has the stronger sense of national identity, yet redistributes less in favour of its worse-off members than does Canada with its welfare state.

Strengthened in the sense that, besides the obligations that I have that stem directly from a shared national identity, I have largely overlapping obligations of citizenship based on reciprocity. If I ask myself: "Why pay my taxes?" two answers can be given: I have duties as a member of this nation to support common projects and to fulfil the needs of fellow members; and I have duties qua citizen to sustain institutions from which I can expect in turn to benefit. Either of these reasons taken separately is vulnerable; together they make a powerful case for contribution.

There are many accounts of basic rights. Among the best, not least because it resists the temptation to expand the list of basic rights to include things that are socially desirable but not really basic, is H. Shue, Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence and American Foreign Policy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

I am considering here the international obligations that would arise in the absence of any ongoing scheme of co-operation between the national communities in question. Later I discuss the obligations of reciprocity that occur when there exists a practice of mutual aid between states to cope with natural disasters of various kinds.


In saying this I do not mean to deny that the economic policies pursued by one nation-state may make it more difficult for another to protect the basic rights of its citizens.

I do not mean that C should not act to fulfil B's rights; this may still be the right thing to do. But it would be hard to blame C if she decided not to do this. This suggests that there could only be a humanitarian obligation to, for example, send relief to famine victims in circumstances where relief was being withheld by that own government (whereas if the government could not send relief, then there is a good case for saying that outside agencies have a duty of justice to supply it).

Several readers have said that the objection to benevolent imperialism is simply that we have no reason to think that imperialism can be benevolent. I think this is merely a way of avoiding a difficult question. Consider a proposal to put most of sub-Saharan Africa under the administrative control of members of the European Community, acting perhaps on behalf of the United Nations. What reason is there to think that the Dutch, the Austrians, or the Swedes — even perhaps the French or the British — could not govern Tanzania, Angola, or Rwanda in a more efficient and humane way than their present rulers? That proposals such as this are today ruled out on principle testifies to the force that the idea of national self-determination has for us.
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