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Ethical Principles Must Underlie Immigration Policy

By Georgie Ann Geyer

Once again, immigration makes the news in America. Thousands of Haitian refugees flee that benighted island. The governors of America's border states sue the federal government for relief over the growing and insatiable costs of illegal immigrants. Even as we celebrate the principles behind the sacred independence of America this Fourth of July, few ever ask: What is the basis on which our crucial immigration decisions should be made? Indeed, as America flails around in an unrooted and ill-defined immigration discussion that sinks either into maudlin sentimentality or into the coldly cruel, is it not time to inquire, What *are* the ethical principles that should underlie those decisions?

First, the sentimental — talk about strange bedfellows! On this side one does indeed find the left — but right there alongside it are the libertarians ("free will" individualists), far-right businessmen such as the growers in the Southwest (who, above all, want cheap labor), and many Christians who incongruously believe in utopian open borders because we must love all mankind.

Perhaps libertarian philosophy professor James Hudson of Northern Illinois University best personifies this viewpoint, when he writes peremptorily that there is no "moral propriety in restricting immigration in any way." He counts, then, in political terms, "everyone," not "every citizen of my country."

In short, this position — extreme to be sure, given that the civilized world is just that *because* it has organized the world into nation-states — recognizes no right of the citizens of a nation to preference over illegal aliens.

The cruel group on the other extreme wants to close down the United States totally, but frankly this group is hardly ever heard from, largely because of the epithets of "racist" and "nativist" bandied about these days. Then we come to the increasingly predominant centrists who want to see the United States itself decide what it wants and needs in terms of immigrants.

Philosophy professor John Lachs of Vanderbilt University supported this position at a recent conference on the ethics of immigration in Los Angeles sponsored by the Carrying Capacity Network. Implicitly attacking "philosophers who love to disregard the actual," Lachs affirmed that our ethical "obligations are specific, focused on ... people who occupy some special position with respect to us." Our first duty morally is to our own parents, children and fellow citizens. Everything else is nonsense that confuses the philosophers' "purified air of the ideal" with the

necessary political imperatives and responsibilities of the nation-state.

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When Professor Garrett Hardin, the renowned scholar on population and global capacity, looks at the ethical question of how and when to be "my brother's keeper," he is even more adamant about first principles and first responsibilities. "Traditional ethics has an answer to this problem," he has said. "Charity begins at home. Why the restriction? Because the greater the distance between donor and recipient, the more likely it is that well-meant charity will cause more harm than good."

Moreover, the ethical imperative grows ever more intense when we study the real outcome of pushing for uncontrolled immigration — and the concomitant lack of assimilation that invariably attends it. Because, as Hardin says, "when immigration is at a slow rate, cultural and linguistic distances can be overcome. But when immigration is very rapid ... the result is conflict."

As for the general altruism of loving everyone in the world and neglecting the reasonable welfare of one's own, perhaps Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek demolished that pretense most effectively. Loving all the world is a "meaningless conception," he said, emphasizing that man can care only for specific individuals in concrete circumstances.

Moreover, the great diplomat George Kennan has written that, by absorbing the poverty of the Third World, the more prosperous society "is sometimes quite overcome, in the long run, by what it has tried to absorb." Any more prosperous society then diminishes itself so that it is no longer an example to the world, and necessarily diminishes the only hope that the poorer countries have to emulate and learn from.

Isn't it odd that a country stumbling over these watershed questions — all of them revolving directly or indirectly about what and who this "American" will become — should not be discussing what rocks we still stand on? ■