

Borders, Culture, and Belonging

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In this paper I offer a perspective on the ethical choices presented by the current difficulties facing Europe, particularly in relation to what has been described as border anxiety. The unprecedented movement of people has attracted two main responses. A core issue for both is the Schengen principle of open borders, at first popular, but now under question, and opinion is split between those who believe that the sheer weight of numbers of would-be migrants requires the reintroduction of strictly controlled frontiers, and those who demand a prompt and sympathetic response to the plight of refugees from war-torn countries. Supporters of these two conflicting positions are reluctant to compromise. The latter regard the moral commitment to help migrants, who might need food, housing, or medical care, as a human rights issue and, as such, an overriding responsibility of more fortunate countries. The former point to the practical problems resulting from unchecked immigration and consequent population increase in host countries. While accepting that decisions made here are not morally neutral, they argue that ethics also requires that sympathy for some must be balanced by recognition of the needs and existing rights of others. These two positions, however, do not constitute the sum of the moral debate which must take account of matters of culture and identity, partiality and preference, and also of some rather more arcane questions about the ethics of ownership, the notion of belonging, and the legitimacy of preferring your 'own', whether at a global, national, or personal level. These are matters that are essentially bound up with the question of who 'belongs' to a country and they raise further challenges involving both multiculturalism and religion. In doing so, they re-open an older and more familiar philosophical debate in which a duty to help those for whom you have special responsibility, or with whom you have a special relationship, is set against principles of equality and non-discrimination. The complexity of this debate and its internal paradoxes throw light on some contemporary concerns about the threat the current situation may pose to Europe's own historic culture and identity.