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The Moral Duty of Solidarity

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I. What is Solidarity?

Suppose you are a white bus rider in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. You look up from your newspaper to see Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. She is expelled from the bus. What should you do?

On the one hand, you have paid your fare for a public service and are entitled to receive it. Justice supports your claim to remain on the bus until you reach your destination. A “Good Samaritan” might take an interest, but if you are on your way to work and need the job to pay the bills, you might look at your shoes and mind your own business. It’s not as though standing up for Mrs. Parks will enable her to keep her seat, it will only cause the bus to be late and might just get you ejected, as well – or worse.

Anyway, how sure can you be that she is telling the truth when she says she is tired and just wants to rest her legs? Perhaps the people accusing her of being ornery – people who are in your social stratum, people you know and like and trust – are right. So what should you do?

I submit that there is a single right answer to this question, and that, at least from our vantage point today, it is obvious to all decent people: you must not stand for this. You should insist that Mrs. Parks be allowed to keep her seat, and if she is ejected from the bus you should walk off alongside her. If her community then boycotts the bus company, you should boycott too.

Admittedly, it might be exceedingly difficult to make yourself do this.

Fast-forward to today. You reside in a neighborhood in which there is a monument to some minor Confederate figure. Local African American activists demand that the statue be removed, perhaps replaced by a statue of Rosa Parks. You might wonder whether it matters all that much; he was after all a minor figure and was rehabilitated into a philanthropist of sorts after the war. And the statue is quite lovely. Your neighbors, whom you know and like, view the statue as a landmark in a neighborhood that, though mostly white, is completely lacking in “Southern sympathizers.” They just like their statue.

It is not completely clear to you why the activists have descended on your neighborhood. This is hardly the most important issue in the world. Most people don't even realize who the guy in the statue was. Why make such a big deal of it?

I submit, again, that there is a single right answer: the statue must go. Not because in some objective or eternal sense there is a rule that we should not honor people of dubious moral character or political leanings, but because there are victims of white supremacy who plausibly see in it a celebration of their oppression, and until they are satisfied that their society does not celebrate their oppression, their demands are compelling.

These cases pit solidarity against friendliness, civility, orderliness, and loyalty. It is not clear in either case whether the outcome will be better or worse by the standards of justice or overall well-being. After all, the white bus rider does not know whether the bus walkout will make things better or worse for African Americans, in Montgomery or nationwide, and the statue removal seems likely to upset people without making life materially better for anyone. In these cases, then, the only reason to act in the way I claim morality requires is that by doing so you act in solidarity with victims of oppression who are refusing to go on being treated and demeaned in habitual ways, and have chosen this site to express their refusal.

“Solidarity” is a popular idea these days, both in political life and, increasingly, in academic writing. But I suspect the popularity of this idea is due in part to a tendency to conflate it with other, less challenging notions.

Solidarity is not just acting together with others for shared political aims; that is an alliance or a coalition. Nor is it simply collective action *for justice*. For as we noted in both cases above, it is not clear that the action in question will enhance justice. For all the actors know in the heat of the moment, things may get worse, not better. In solidarity it's not essential that you think the action likely to succeed. It's not essential that it be directed at a just outcome. It's not essential that you would yourself endorse the action if it were up to you. What's essential is that you would act alongside the other even if you thought they were wrong. I call this attitude *deference*. When you act in solidarity with someone, you act on their behalf: *as they would have acted if they could be in two places at once*.

Solidarity can thus be defined, roughly, as political action on others' terms.

That is a dangerous idea. What could justify you in acting contrary to your best judgment about what is strategically or even morally best; contrary to the best judgment of your peers and friends; contrary to the interests of your family and community?

II. What could Justify Solidarity?

I suggest that solidarity is justified, when it is, neither by the ends you pursue nor by the means you use to pursue them, nor by your relationship with the larger group. It is justified not by justice as a goal of the action, but by justice as a duty that you owe to those who ask for your solidarity. It is in this sense “deontological”: a duty owed irrespective of its consequences.

Of course, people request your solidarity all the time. White supremacists are big on it. But surely it is only rarely if ever that white supremacists are entitled to your solidarity. So who is, and why?

The core moral notion in my defense of solidarity is *equity*. This term explains both who is owed solidarity, and why: both the *object* of solidarity, and its *justification*.

Equity is the core of justice. It is recognition of each as an equal, and as entitled to basic fairness and coequal citizenship. Not all injustice is inequity; for instance, “mere” economic deprivation below some baseline does not seem to meet this criterion, but economic deprivation that is grounded in a “stacked deck” against, say, mine workers or undocumented immigrants clearly does.

Larry May connects equity to the basic *Magna Carta* rights, which are rights not to be “disappeared,” not to be answerable to unknown charges or accusers, not to be made an outlaw, not to be deported into peril. All of these, May contends, have to do with *visibility* – that each person be seen, and I would add be *seen as* a person and an equal. Systemic discrimination such as that faced by Rosa Parks in 1955 is a particularly vivid example of inequity in this sense.

My contention is that solidarity is owed to those who suffer inequitable treatment, when they are engaged in a struggle against those who treat them inequitably. We owe solidarity to victims of inequity, which means we should stand and act alongside them, on their terms, when they struggle against their oppressors.

But why does equity require solidarity? Here I distinguish three senses of equity. The first is traced back to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, by way of contemporary followers such as Larry May, Anna Stilz, and Aaron James. Suppose you are treated inequitably. By responding to your call for solidarity, I not only *do* something but I also *express* something: my action in solidarity expresses my rejection of your inequitable treatment, and effectively rebukes your abusers. In so acting I see and recognize you as an equal, entitled to equal status and respect.

Notice that it does not matter here whether I am to blame for your inequitable treatment; innocent bystanders who fail to respond to the call for solidarity thereby fail to treat people equitably. They fail to rebuke the abuser, and continue on their way as though the abuse were an appropriate way to treat you: as if you were just another object on the sidewalk.

So suppose you are about to enter a hotel where you have a reservation, but there is a picket line outside. The custodial staff is on strike and asking you to refuse to cross the line. You can either deny their request for solidarity by crossing the line, or respect it by refusing to cross. You cannot, say, express your sympathies and then feel good about yourself as you go in through the back door. If you cross the line, you participate in their inequitable treatment; you see them as an obstacle rather than as equals.

You might object that just seeing the picket line doesn’t tell you all you need to know. Isn’t it fair, then, to take some information and decide for yourself whom to support? I can grant this for the sake of argument. Even so, you must still choose what to do *now, while you are deciding*. Cross the line and think about it once comfortable in your hotel room

which was cleaned by replacement workers? Or refuse to cross the line? There is, again, no third option.

Unlike views that justify solidarity by appeal to the eventual justice that the cause brings about or aims at, the current view, which I call “Solidarity as Equity,” justifies it on the basis that it treats others equitably in the instant. Equitable treatment is an *ultimate value*: it is justified in itself and does not depend on any further justification. So if solidarity (partly) constitutes equity, then solidarity, too, is intrinsically valuable. It is valuable irrespective of anything else it brings about. Equitable treatment is not optional but is *owed*, to particular people at particular times, like a debt. We have no right to treat people inequitably unless they specifically release us to do so. (This might happen if, say, someone was having a heart attack and needed to get into the hotel lobby to receive CPR. Or more prosaically, if someone had checked in before the strike started, and now needed to get back inside to collect their belongings and check out.)

There is a second sense of equity, one that derives from Aristotle, by way of contemporary interpreters such as Martha Nussbaum. For Aristotle, equity requires seeing people and their plight as particulars rather than as abstractions. Sometimes, general rules misrecognize or misrepresent particular people in distinctive contexts, and hence the application even of just rules would be unjust. Affirmative Action seems to be such a case. Justice Harlan’s famous dictum that “the Constitution is color-blind” expresses an abstract justice that, in the real world, hinders efforts to repair racial injustice. Equity requires partly setting aside the abstraction in order to do justice in the real world. The so-called “right to work” is another example of the same phenomenon. Freedom of association is an important right, but given the real-world bargaining advantages of owners over workers, the abstraction hinders workers’ real freedom of association. Consequently, equity supports relaxing the *abstract* fairness to achieve the *concrete* fairness for which effective unions are often required. Thus solidarity is not only about stark cases like Rosa Parks vs. Jim Crow; it can be about supporting unions and affirmative action, as well.

Finally, a third sense of equity, also from Aristotle, is relevant to solidarity: *being an equitable person*. According to Aristotle, an equitable person not only “chooses and does [equitable] acts” such as the ones described above, but also “is no stickler for his rights in a bad sense but tends to take less than his share though he has the law on his side.” It may seem odd to describe someone acting in solidarity as taking *less* than his share, given that we associate solidarity with making demands. But recall the white bus rider in Montgomery, Alabama. Solidarity in his case involves sacrificing the bus ride for which he has paid, and joining the ensuing boycott, even at some cost to himself, and even if he doubts the effectiveness of the tactic. Indeed, even if he strongly believes that the tactic is doomed to backfire, that is what has been chosen by a group that is struggling for equity. Insofar as he is an equitable person, I contend, he will participate in the boycott, accepting his share of the beatings and the fire hoses. He will not seek to exempt himself from the fate that befalls those who are specifically targeted for police anger. Moreover, given that this supporter is white, he may recognize that his presence has a political power that the bodies of African Americans are not accorded by Montgomery police, and hence use his body to shield others.

Aristotle's concept of an equitable person thus has two roles in the moral justification of solidarity. First, on the front end, it counsels us not to do what we think best, even if we are right about that: not to stand on (our confident belief in) our own correctness, but to defer to the group. Second, on the back end, it counsels us not to take advantage of our own ability, within an unjust context, to escape the unjust treatment that others cannot escape. Rather, to be in solidarity is to share the fate of the victims of injustice.

III. Limits to Solidarity

All this may be plausible or even inspiring, but it might also be scary. What if it's neo-Nazis who claim they are being treated inequitably? Or what if the victims of inequity demand that we jump off a cliff to show solidarity? Or what if I am a hotel guest with a particular ability to convince management to meet the picketers' demands, but I have to cross the picket line to do so?

Let's take that last question first. Suppose I come to the picket line and realize that I can do better *for the strikers*, but only if I cross the line to negotiate with management. Shouldn't I, then, cross the line? The first response is that this kind of case is rare. Socially privileged and relatively wealthy people often believe that their individual intercession can and should make a difference in a way that even the collective action of the poor cannot. We are usually wrong about this. But suppose I really can make a difference by myself. In that case what I should do is check in with the strikers. If they want me to intercede I should do so. If not, then my doing so is an imposition on them, in fact a demonstration that their fate is determined by factors outside their control. My savior-like intervention is then an attack; even if it helps win the day today, it erodes the workers' efficacy in the long term. Solidarity does not necessarily entail doing exactly as everyone else is doing; each of us brings to the table skills, talents, and, yes, forms of privilege that might be useful to the struggle. But the essential first step is to put these capacities at the disposal of the struggle, to be deployed at the behest of the group, not subject to our own ingenuous guesses.

How much can solidarity demand, though? The question of demandingness is a perennial problem for moral theories. At the margins it always seems more important to help out the desperate than to pursue our own private goals; and yet if we never prioritize our own goals we will not be able to have lives of our own. I have no firm answer to this question, but my view is that we can make sense of the idea – admittedly still fuzzy – of a person's living *for justice*. When I take stock of my life I should be able to say that justice was the point of my life; that I evinced an abiding and genuine commitment to the struggle for a more just world and to the plight of people in it; that I was never complacent and self-satisfied; and that I could be relied upon when needed, when the struggle confronted me and I needed to choose a side. Moreover, if I am to live for justice I must be *organized*, for nothing can be accomplished alone. By pooling resources we become more intelligent, effective, and reliable, enabling individuals to cycle in and out of the fray as life allows, even as the *esprit de corps* helps build our capacity and resolve.

But finally, what happens if I am in solidarity with a group whose actions themselves treat others inequitably – say, by burning crosses or parading with swastikas? The answer is that I must oppose my erstwhile allies, and do so *in the name of solidarity itself*. Solidarity

is justified by equity, and by equity it is also limited. Suppose the neo-Nazis are themselves socioeconomically disadvantaged: they have a legitimate complaint against the rich, but instead they pick fights with a minority ethnic group. They thereby turn themselves into the oppressors; solidarity requires switching sides to support the minority ethnic group. This is a crucial difference between solidarity and something like loyalty or tribalism, which might allow us to stay onside even when our group is the oppressor. But when solidarity does recommend switching sides like this, the reason for doing so is not the *identity* or even the *beliefs* of the neo-Nazis, but their *actions* and *aims*. If people (who happen to be neo-Nazis) are demanding a raise from an exploitive boss, then solidarity with them can, indeed, be required. But if they then start attacking their boss's ethnicity, gender, or race, supporters must object.

IV. Conclusion

We live in perilous political times, where nefarious actors sow division and use both money and violence to foster the power of the few. Solidarity is the essential, and sometimes the only, tool of the oppressed. Yet those of us in the middle – philosophers, white activists and commentators, journalists, the “middle class” – seem to use our words, our money, our bodies, and our votes to punch downwards at least as often as we punch upwards. Or else we sit on the sidelines and treat political struggle as someone else's problem.

This is wrong. We are morally required to treat people equitably, and solidarity – taking political action on others' terms – is how we can do so. Consequently, solidarity is valuable even when we lose, and is owed to others not as a form of charity or generosity, but as a duty: as basic equity.

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