Making the Strangers' Case: An Ethical Approach to Migration

Meredith Williams

The word "stranger" means "someone you do not know" ("Stranger", def.). It can be associated with danger or mystery, fuelled by a fear of the unknown. Since medieval times, migrants have been called "strangers" (Joby). Yet, if migrants remain "strangers" to the public, we isolate them, and refuse to critically engage with Levinas' "Other", a process he considered to be the foundation of ethics and progress (The Ethics Centre). Such refusal allows politics and international power-plays to take advantage of migration (Bauböck et al. 433). This essay proposes an ethical approach to migration founded in Kantianism that instead promotes progress for all through upholding dignity, respect, and universalizable obligations. This fulfils a government's dual obligation to its people and to the international community by supporting a system of reciprocity, fostering a cycle of ethical treatment for all in an increasingly perilous world.

A significant challenge for migrants is narrative. When political leaders talk of "becoming an island of strangers", or refer to migration as a "flood" or "chaos", they reinforce what Hernandez calls the "villain" narrative – the idea that migrants "will hurt us economically and culturally" (Starmer; Brunet; Starmer; Hernandez 7). This narrative focuses on what a receiving country will lose, instead of what migrants can help it achieve. For example, the 2025 annual report of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) of the United Kingdom, which informs policy on migration, focuses on the fiscal cost, rather than the longer-term social and cultural impacts, of migrants (Migration Advisory Committee).

Migrant progress is also hindered by the "securitization of migration" (Bohnet, et al 3). In NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, migration is seen as a threat used by authoritarian regimes to challenge the alliance's "democratic way of life" (3). Migration is again viewed through a lens of risk and cost, which Bohnet and others argue neglects "other topics of concern, like development" (7).

Some NATO countries themselves have been admonished for self-centred use of migration. In 2024, the Internation Council of Nurses accused the G20 of "active recruitment of vulnerable nations' nurses" thereby exacerbating global inequalities through a "short-sighted and unsustainable approach" instead of investing in their own health systems for the long-term (Cipriano). This shows how selective migration policies can be detrimental to the progress of the countries from which migrants depart.

Migration, as defined by Bauböck, is a "hard ethical dilemma". It comprises "a persistent conflict of morally worthy goals" that are challenging to reconcile (429). Creating a world of "strangers" allows political expediency, not ethical obligations, to dominate. Often, politicians default to sustaining popularity, shirking the effort of solving these "hard dilemmas" (Bauböck et al. 433). But there is an ethical obligation inherent in "progress for all" that must diminish selfinterest for a greater good.

Carens says this greater good is freedom of movement, and an acceptance by states that they must accept migrants with minimal rights to exclude (Carens *Overview* 426). Others, such as Wellman, Walzer, and Miller – to varying degrees – place greater emphasis on the rights of states to impose limits on admitting migrants (Wellman 109; Carens *Refugees* 31; Miller). Both approaches, however, remain focused on the classic individual/state dichotomy of rights. Migration's distinction is that it is an international issue, meaning that, when progress for all is the aim, a government's ethical framework must expand to accommodate other states and citizens.

Benjamin Zephaniah reminds us that "we can all be refugees", and in so doing suggests the ethical underpinning for an internationally-focused migration framework (Zephaniah). He echoes Kant's categorical imperative. Kant says, "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law" and "So act as to treat humanity…in every case as an end withal, never as means only." (Kant). Thus, in an increasingly perilous world, the best way for a government to protect its people is to ensure that migrants are not "strangers" and that they, and other states, are treated with humanity, so that the same treatment may be universally extended to their own people.

Applying this framework shows how actions, such as recruiting nurses from vulnerable nations, are not ethical. A Kantian framework would require states to consider the damage their actions might cause and remedy them. For example: recruiting nurses but reciprocating with support for the other states' healthcare systems. Similarly, the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees could be amended to take into account climate change (Singer

285). Under a Kantian system, this would mean ensuring countries that disproportionately fuel climate change take responsibility for the migration it causes. A Kantian approach by the MAC would consider more than fiscal cost. It would include the benefits of family reunification for the wellbeing of migrants, and add into the equation the social and cultural good the migrants could bring with them.

The same Kantian principle of dignity and respect for all draws attention to a relatively unexplored area of migration policy (New Zealand Productivity Commission 105; Rata). A migration system cannot be applied universally, and progress cannot be made for all, if indigenous populations are not involved in policy-making. A Kantian system would respect the legitimacy of colonised voices on migration policy, recognising that the most ethical solutions might not be those that existing colonial structures want or expect.

In conclusion, governments have an ethical obligation to ensure that their migration policies focus on sustainability, not politically expedient and harmful narratives. Migration is an international issue: to ensure progress for all, a government's ethical obligations must extend beyond state boundaries to uphold the dignity of migrants, the sending, and the receiving states. Shakespeare understood this ethical duty over 400 years ago in *Sir Thomas More*, where he underlined the consequences of treating "strangers" unethically, and the importance of collective affirmative action. Sir Thomas chastises protesters for resorting to hateful narratives, and asks us the vital question: "What would you think/ To be us'd thus?" reminding us, even before Kant, that universalizability "… is the stranger's case". We are all one crisis away from becoming migrants, and a government's ethical framework needs to understand the implications of that for its people. To ignore it is unethical – it is "your mountainish inhumanity." (Shakespeare qtd. in University of Oxford).

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