Elaine Scarry

The Difficulty of Imagining Other People

The way we act toward "others" is shaped by the way we imagine them. Both philosophic and literary descriptions of such imagining show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity. This is true even when the person is a friend or acquaintance; the problem is further magnified when the person is a stranger or "foreigner." Cruelty to strangers and foreigners has prompted many people to seek ways to prevent such actions from recurring. Some solutions envision a framework of cosmopolitan largesse that relies on the population to spontaneously and generously "imagine" other persons, and to do so on a day-by-day basis. Alternative solutions, in contrast, attempt to solve the problem of human "otherness" through constitutional design: they seek to eliminate altogether the inherently aversive structural position of "foreignness."

We have the obligation to commit ourselves to both solutions. But I weight my comments to the sphere of constitutional design, because if this solution is in place then the spontaneous acts of individuals have a chance of producing generous outcomes. By contrast, if constitutional solutions to foreignness are not in place, then the daily practice of spontaneous largesse will have little effect, and all our conversations about otherness will be idle. It may at first appear that the constitutional alternative only protects people within the borders of a given country, but we will eventually see that ensuring a deep regard for "foreigners" outside the borders also requires constitutional design.

Are there large numbers of people who advocate the imaginative solution over the constitutional one? The answer is yes. Even many of those German intellectuals most passionately dedicated to stopping injuries to Turkish residents often ignore altogether any discussion of altering German citizenship laws and concentrate instead on practices that can be summarized under the heading of "generous imaginings." Meetings among international scholars dedicated to human rights often express an indifference to, or impatience with, national protections on rights, and rely exclusively on international formulations. And discussions about foreignness among American intellectuals—like Martha Nussbaum's defense of cosmopolitanism—display an increasingly shared animus against "nationalism," which is perceived to be an impediment to "internationalism."

But on close inspection such attempts to replace nationalism by internationalism often turn out to entail a rejection of constitutionalism in favor of unanchored good will that can be summarized under the heading of generous imaginings. It is therefore important to come face to face with the limits on imagining other people, since in several different spheres an overly optimistic account is used to legitimate the bypassing of legal provisions and constitutional procedures. My worry about the cosmopolitan bypassing of constitutionalism is twofold. The first is the erasure of any authorizing base for the ethical principle one wants to see enforced: if twenty scholars from twenty different countries believe a certain
right should be protected, they may feel, as they speak with one another, that their views rise above "mere" nationalism; but in fact their views only represent the beliefs of twenty people (a much smaller number than the population of even the smallest country), unless the populations of the various geographical areas from which they come have themselves voted to uphold the given right. Human rights are universal in content, but they are particular in their base of authorization and enforcement.

My second ground of concern, the one to which I address myself here, is the misconception of the imagination that often inspires the wish to rise above parochial constitutionalisms.

I. The Difficulty of Imagining Others: The Case of "Enemies"

The difficulty of imagining others is shown by the fact that one can be in the presence of another person who is in pain and not know that the person is in pain. The ease of remaining ignorant of another person's pain even permits one to inflict it and amplify it in the body of the other person while remaining immune oneself. Sustained and repeated instances of this are visible in political regimes that torture.

I focus on physical injury here because other forms of well-being—voting rights, access to education, the daily possibility of interesting work—are all premised on bodily inviolability. Indeed, the social contract comes into being precisely to minimize bodily injury. Locke, a physician as well as a political philosopher, repeatedly uses the word "injury" in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Though the "injury" is not specified as, or limited to, bodily injury, it takes its force from that original context. Locke uses the verb "injures" both where the object is the material reality of the body and where the object is freedom, just as he speaks of invading another's body, invading another's property (the "annexed body"), or instead invading another's rights. When Locke uses the idiom of "invasion" for a nonphysical object, he often immediately follows it by the word *rapine*, to restore the physical referent.

The strong relation between the social contract and the diminution of injury is visible in social contracts that long antedate the Lockean contract. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, many of the five hundred major European cities came into existence through explicit acts of oath taking and contract making. Often called "sworn communes," "conjunctiones," or "communes for peace," their very names memorialized the extraordinary verbal process by which they had come into being. In the language of these city compacts, as in the Lockean compact, we can hear the key association between self-governance and the diminution of injury. The founding of Freiburg, for example, emphasizes the guarantee of "peace and protection." The Flemish charter of Aire promises, "Let each help the other like a brother." And one oath for mutual assistance from the Bologna region states that the members should "maintain and defend each other against all men, within the commune and outside it." The town's commitment to protecting its members from outside aggression by no means implied that outsiders were themselves subjected to aggressive treatment. Outsiders who entered the city could become insiders at their own discretion. Harold Berman writes that "immigrants were to be granted the same rights as citizens [the right to vote, to bear arms, to a jury trial] after residence for a year and a day." The relatively swift transformation from immigrant to citizen suggests that bearing the status of "foreigner" was itself seen to be an injurious condition and hence one that it was the obligation of the commune to remove.

Bodily injury is, then, what necessitates the social contract in both theory and practice, in both the Lockean contract and the earlier city contracts. The contract comes into being to put constraints on the act. The ease of inflicting injury (as well as the om-
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of a beloved friend, one we know in intricate detail (as Sartre knew in detail the faces of Annie and Pierre), it will be, by comparison with an actually present face, “thin,” “dry,” “two-dimensional,” and “inert.”

This description of imagining a friend illuminates the problems that await us when we rely on the imagination as a guarantor of political generosity. Transport the problems of trying to imagine a single friend to the imaginative labor of knowing the other—not an intimate friend, not any single person at all, but instead five, or ten, or one hundred, or one hundred thousand; or \( x \), the number of Turks residing in Germany; or \( y \), the number of illegal aliens living in the United States; or \( z \), the estimated number of Iraqi soldiers and citizens killed in our bombing raids; or 70 million, the scale of population that stands to suffer should the United States fire a nuclear missile (a conservative estimate). Philosophic discussions of the other typically contemplate the other in the singular.

What we do not do well in the singular we do even less well in the plural. The human capacity to injure other people has always been much greater than its ability to imagine other people. Or perhaps we should say, the human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.

It might be objected that the “best case” for the powers of the imagination should be made not by assessing the daydreaming mind but the mind as it produces images under the instruction of an author. To be sure, this is the place—the place of great literature—where the ability to imagine others becomes very strong. Great novels, great poems, great plays often do incite in our imaginings the vivacity of the perceptual world. During the hours of reading Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Tess comes before the mind with far more fullness, surprise, vividness than Sartre’s two-dimensional images or our own day-

II. The Difficulty of Imagining Others: The Case of Friends

If we take as our starting point the action of injuring, we have taken the imagination at the moment when its failures, its limitations, already stand fully exposed. Let us turn instead to the “best case” picture of imagining. How fully we are able to imagine other persons can best be measured by moving away from the category of “enemy” to the category of “friend.” (It is unlikely that a foreign population can ever achieve the fullness in one’s imagination that a single personal friend achieves, but let us assume for the moment that such a thing would be possible.) How capacious is the imagination at its most capacious? When we speak in everyday conversation about the imagination, we often attribute to it powers greater than ordinary sensation. But Sartre’s study of the imagination powerfully underscores its limits. He asks us to perform the concrete experiment of comparing an imagined object with a perceptual one—that is, of actually stopping, closing our eyes, concentrating on the imagined face of a friend or a familiar room, then opening our eyes and comparing its attributes to whatever greets us when we return to the sensory world. We find at once that the imagined object lacks the vitality and vivacity of the perceived. Even if the object we select to imagine in this experiment is the face
dreams. But while novels and poems are better able than
daydreams to bring other persons to press on our minds, even here
we must recognize severe limits of imaginative accomplishment.

One key limit is the number of characters. A novel or poem may
have one major character. Or perhaps four. It is impossible to hold
rich multitudes of imaginary characters simultaneously in the
mind. Presented with the huge number of characters one finds in
Dickens or in Tolstoi, one must constantly strain to keep them
sorted out; and of course their numbers are still tiny when com-
pared with the number of persons to whom we are responsible in
political life.

A second constraint concerns our tolerance for imaginary fea-
tures that are different from our own actual features. The latent
nationalism or tribalism of great literature may make it a seductive ve-
hicle for an exercise in self-reflection and self-identification, rather
than reflection upon and identification with people different from
oneself. Despite, for example, the emphasis on artistic multicultura-
lism in the United States, it sometimes appears that Asian-
American literature is being read by Asian Americans, Afro-
American literature by Afro-Americans, and Euro-American litera-
ture by Euro-Americans.

A third limit is the lack of any anchor in historical reality. More
often than not, fictional others lack referents in material reality. It
has often been a criticism of literature that the very imaginative la-
bor of picturing others that we ought to expend on real persons on
our city streets, or on the other side of the border, instead comes to
be lavished on King Lear or on Tess. Pushkin provided a stunning
portrait of how we come out of the opera, absorbed with compas-
sion for those on stage, not seeing the cabdriver and horses who
are freezing from their long wait to carry us home.12

I have been calling attention to the limits on solving real-world
otherness through literary representation alone. There are, of
course, exceptional cases. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s
Cabin made Blacks—the weight, solidity, injurability of their per-
sonhood—imaginable to the White population in pre–Civil War
United States. E. M. Forster’s Passage to India is almost the only
other novel that has had an equivalent claim made for it: the book,
ownight, according to Stephen Spender, enabled the British pop-
ulation to begin to reimagine India’s population as independent.
But the Stowe and Forster examples are extremely rare, both be-
cause they required readers to imagine not just “a person” but “a
people,” and above all because they modified the well-being of ac-
tual persons to bring about greater freedom and hence a diminu-
tion of the status of otherness. More often we must say of literature
what Auden wrote in his elegy for Yeats: “Poetry makes nothing
happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying.”13

Finally and most important, even in these exceptional cases
where a novel incites in one population the ability to imagine more
fully a second population, the test of that new imaginative capa-
ciousness is not in the pleasurable feeling of cosmopolitan largesse
but in the concrete willingness to change constitutions and laws:
the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the U.S.
Constitution; the Independence of India Act of 1947. How can
such constitutional and legal changes be made if the polity, the
nation-state, comes to be regarded as an object of cosmopolitan
disdain?

III. Equality of Weightlessness

When we seek equality through generous imaginings, we start
with our own weight, then attempt to acquire knowledge about the
weight and complexity of others. The alternative strategy is to
achieve equality between self and other not by trying to make one’s
knowledge of others as weighty as one’s self-knowledge, but by
making one ignorant about oneself, and therefore as weightless as
all others.

This strategy of imaginative recovery has been developed by
Bertrand Russell, and more elaborately and influentially by John Rawls. Russell argued that when reading the newspaper each day, we ought routinely to substitute the names of alternative countries to test whether our response to the event arises from a moral assessment of the action or instead from a set of prejudices about the country.\textsuperscript{14} This ethical practice, which obligates us to detach a given action from country X and reattach it to country Y, might be called “the rotation of nouns.” Rawls imagines a social contract made behind a “veil of ignorance” that prevents people from knowing any of their particular traits. The veil of ignorance fosters equality not by giving the millions of other people an imaginative weight equal to one’s own—a staggering mental labor—but by the much more efficient strategy of simply erasing for a moment one’s own dense array of attributes. Through it we create what Rawls describes as “the symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other.”\textsuperscript{15} Constitutional arrangements, too, rely on this strategy of imagined weightlessness, since they define rights and powers that are independent of any one person’s personal features.

The problem with discussions of “the other” is that they characteristically emphasize generous imaginings, and thus allow the fate of another person to be contingent on the generosity and wisdom of the imaginer. But solutions ought not to give one group the power to regulate the welfare of another group in this way. Picture, for example, a town in which third-generation light-skinned residents can vote but third-generation dark-skinned residents cannot vote. The light-skinned residents—through goodwill and large-mindedness—take into consideration, before they vote, the position of the dark-skinned residents. (This is a utopian assumption, of course, given the difficulty of imagining other people; but for the sake of argument, let us suppose they are able and willing to do it.) Thus they have acted to minimize the problem of foreignness or otherness or heterogeneity by holding in their minds a picture of those other people on the basis of which they make their political decisions.

Now contrast this with a situation in which the dark-skinned third-generation residents are citizens and vote for themselves. Light-skinned residents no longer need to act on behalf of the others. Because a constitutional provision enables each group to act on its own behalf, no group any longer occupies the legal position of the other. Even if we stipulate that in the first solution the light-skinned third-generation residents act with maximum generosity and largesse, the second solution is obviously much stronger. They would, even at best, be acting paternally, and hence operating outside the frame of social contract whose purpose, as Locke argued in his Second Treatise of Government, was precisely to decouple paternal power from political power.

What differentiates the first and second strategies of inclusion (let us call them Town One and Town Two) is the principle of self-representation: to endorse that principle is to reject the idea of protecting people by empowering an enfranchised group to look after them by means of generous imaginings.

To stress the importance of creating laws that eliminate the structural position of the other, I have presented the acts of imagining others and unimagining oneself as two separate alternatives. Although when each is considered in isolation the second is stronger than the first, together the two are far stronger than either alone. Town Two only fully works when supplemented with Town One’s magnanimous imaginings, especially when reciprocated across mutually enfranchised groups. And the importance of Town One’s commitment to the imagination is particularly clear when we consider the existence of borders. While it is possible to eliminate the legal position of the Other within a country, it is not possible to do so for people outside its borders. Here the problem of otherness, with its steady danger of injury, cannot be addressed
through voting rights but might seem dependent on the largess of the imagination alone. Even this cosmopolitan practice of the imagination, however, can be constitutionally encouraged and safeguarded.

Right now, for example, the United States has a nuclear policy that permits a president, acting almost alone, to authorize the firing of nuclear weapons. How should people in the United States protect other populations from the sudden use of this monarchical weapons system? Should we hope that at the moment of firing, the president will suddenly have the imaginative powers to picture other people in their full density of concerns, picture not one caricatured leader but the men and women and young people of that country? But the U.S. Constitution was written to ensure that the fate of other populations would never be left up to the accident of whether a U.S. president (or any solitary person, or forty or fifty solitary persons that might make up a presidential council or a weapons crew) happens to be resourceful at imagining other populations. It anticipates, and attempts to diminish, the problem of otherness by building in elaborate requirements for debate and deliberation both in the Congress and among the citizens, requirements that ensure that voices speaking on behalf of the about-to-be-injured population will be heard. In other words, it distributes the responsibility to imagine other people to a large portion of the population. Since the invention of atomic weapons, these constitutional safeguards have disappeared. Yet within the U.S. Constitution at this very moment are the provisions—the legal tools—to prohibit, to make impossible, mass destruction.

Alarm over the disappearance of these constitutional safeguards has been muted by many factors, among them the sense on the part of intellectuals that any site bound up with the polity—such as Congress or the Constitution—is somehow a piece of parochial nationalism, hence not something whose disappearance need worry us. Thus the very agency that would constrain our weapons is ig-

ored in the name of high-minded internationalism. International congresses such as the United Nations have a crucial role to play if and only if any act of national aggression requires their authorization in addition to the constitutionally mandated congressional or parliamentary authorization of the home country. But the deliberative actions of the UN are instead often taken as a substitute for congressional action. Any cosmopolitan who believes this is an admirable outcome should read the private papers of U.S. presidents throughout the second half of the twentieth century: again and again, a president will openly acknowledge how much easier it is to secure UN authorization than Congressional authorization for an act of international aggression he has wished to initiate.

Legal provisions to distribute the rights of citizenship across a country’s internal population do not guarantee that those citizens will abstain from injuring one another; so, too, legal provisions to ensure that foreigners—those outside the country’s borders—will be carefully imagined before a willful infliction of injury takes place cannot necessarily guarantee that their own specifications will be followed. But such legal arrangements at least objectify an aspiration; they set the standard of action, and they provide the mechanism for holding the population to its promises.

Civil society can only exist if it is produced by the constituents of that country. The major constitutive act is the making of a constitution. The Federalist Papers continually asked the question: What kind of arrangement will produce a noble and generous people? Perhaps every group of constitution-makers has asked this same question. Nor is it restricted to the liberal democratic ethos. Marx, in the Grundrisse, contrasts the question asked by contemporary economic societies—What kind of arrangements will make the most money?—with the question asked by more ancient societies, what kind of city-state will produce the best citizens? But he concludes that our present interest in production and distribution is only a partially veiled manifestation of the ancient concern with
the creation of good people. Audible in works as different as the *Federalist Papers* and the *Grundrisse* is the assumption—present everywhere in the social contract theorists—that the social contract recreates us, that it is a lever across which we act on, and continually revise, ourselves. More self-revision is needed as we continue to repair our laws and prepare for a more generous future. And that self-revision will best proceed through our constitutional structures and aspirations, and not simply through a reliance on expanding our imaginings.

The work accomplished by a structure of laws cannot be accomplished by a structure of sentiment. Constitutions are needed to uphold cosmopolitan values.

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**Amartya Sen**

**Humanity and Citizenship**

If Martha Nussbaum’s intention was to provoke people, she has certainly managed to do that. This must count as success. The failure to provoke anyone in a deeply divisive subject would be good evidence of banality. I would like to comment on an issue about which Nussbaum has been particularly attacked. This concerns her endorsement of Diogenes’ norm, “I am a citizen of the world,” which carries the implication that a person’s “allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings.”

**Critiques of World Citizenship**

Several objections have been raised to the idea of world citizenship. I shall consider three. First, Sissela Bok is worried that the norm Nussbaum endorses seems to support the conclusion—which may be taught to children—that “all claims to national or other identity” are “morally irrelevant.” Bok finds Nussbaum perilously close to William Godwin’s view that “if two persons are drowning and one is a relative of yours, then kinship