

Hello Mr. Sangiovanni,

Yesterday we were talking about the importance of relationships in the justification of the obligation we feel we have to help others. I'm going to try and be as clear and simple as possible, as much for me as for you, as I find it hard expressing myself in an "academic" English.

First off, by "helping others" → I suppose we mean give our **attention, time, effort and resources**.

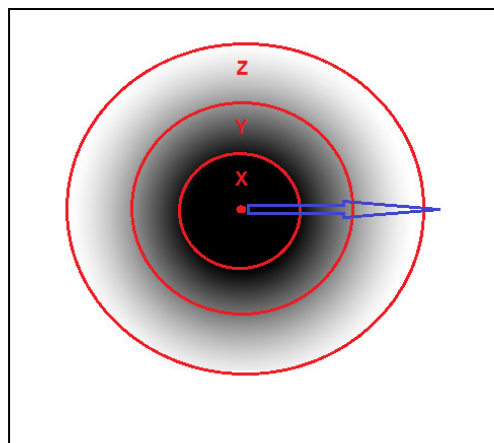
One of the arguments yesterday was that there needs to be a connection between states/people in order to create an obligation of help between them. Because if 2 states/people live in ignorance of each other, then obviously it seems hard for them to have any kind of mutual obligation.

So, to return to what was being discussed, Alison was the only arguing that relationships were actually the basis of the obligation, because without relationships, we'd never feel compelled to help anyone. My first thought is that there's something troubling about that but at the same time it seems to be true, and furthermore, as I thought about it a bit further, it seems to be the best possible way.

Here's my point. If we're talking about all this, it's in the big picture of equality, distribute Justice, more generally *what's the best way to lead our lives according to the necessity of organizing the world in a harmonious way*. Whatever the system for everyone, it entails a certain number of obligations for each and every individual.

On this, I like the idea of concentric circles, and this got me wondering about the link (if any) between the position one holds within the circles and the obligations I would have towards them.

So, basically :



The centre is me, and around me is an infinite number of circles, of which I've pointed out three, creating different zones:

- The X zone: family and friends
- The Y zone: from fringe acquaintances to fellow nationals.
- The Z zone: the rest of the world.

So, intuitively, it seems to show how much attention, time, effort and resources I spend on others, kind of like an empirical measure of my actual "help" to others around me. So:

	Amount of attention, time, effort and resources	Number of people concerned
Zone X	95%	200 people

Zone Y	4%	1% of world population
Zone Z	1%	99% of world population

If we take out the fact that most of us spend the majority of our attention, time, effort and resources for our own personal sakes, then this tends to show that we distribute what's left in the most unequal way: we attribute the vast majority of that on a tiny proportion of the amount of potential beneficiaries in the world.

However, that is unreasonable criticism. Because this system relies on the underlying belief **that the people who are on the fringes of our circles are themselves the centre of their own circles and central to other people's circles**. The hope on which the whole system relies therefore is that everyone is, somehow, covered by a dark zone. In an ideal world and in its purest expression, the system of overlapping concentric circles of social life would ensure global harmony → dare I say, *global harmony as a social network*.

However, reality shows that this system brakes down, because there are people who are left in complete white zones, isolated either:

- Geographically
- Socially
- In terms of resources

Global harmony is therefore not ensured by the system.

Is the whole "relationship-system" the right one then?

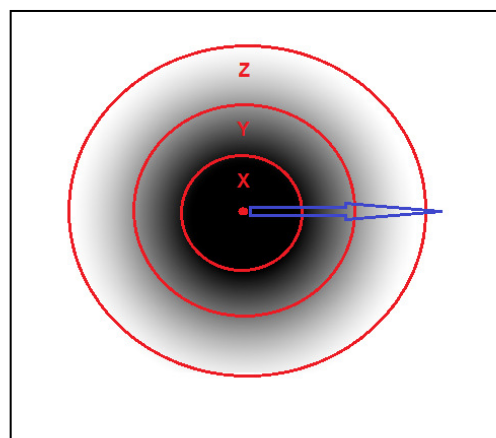
What alternatives?

Reverse the categories? So that:

- 99% of my "help" → went to 99% of the unknown world
- 1% of my "help" → went to the couple hundred people I know

Then, maybe the world would be a more "equal place", but surely I would be very unhappy, and my help wouldn't be directed in the correct way. It would almost be a "draining". This allows me to say that before equality comes the necessity to ensure that we can satisfy our needs to be social beings.

Redesigning or readjusting the concentric circle system? We could be forced to rethink the diameters of our circles in order to cover these "white patches". But then that would force us to redistribute our attention, time, effort and resources to people who wouldn't normally be beneficiaries → this brings us to the question of the obligation we hold to others, and how does their position within my concentric circles matter.



In this design, what does the dark shade represent?

- 1st possibility: closeness/proximity (the darker, the closer) in 2 ways:
 - o Geographically (but not necessarily)
 - o **Affectively**: I obviously feel affectively closer to my family and friends than to my compatriots or to strangers living across the world.
- 2nd possibility: degree of importance in our lives, or “**preference**” → I would *prefer* to spend my attention, time, effort and resources on those who are close to me in affective terms rather than on strangers. Why is that? I guess there are many reasons (we can see the benefits, we are pleased to help those we know, reciprocity, etc...), but searching to overturn them is not something I want to do as I think the aim here is to find a way of allowing us to keep these preferences all the while finding a solution to those who are isolated, in the “white patches”.
- 3rd possibility: strength of **obligation** to “help”: it could be that we feel we have a stronger obligation to “help” those in the closer circles and the further away we go the more the obligation fades away.

However, I’m not all too happy with that final observation on the degree of obligation.

Suppose both my mother and a stranger both need a kidney transplant, and I have the only available good kidney going. Obviously, intuitively, I will feel “obliged” to give my kidney to my mother. But at the end of the day, am I not also just as obliged to save the stranger? Is it really a stronger sense of obligation that sways the decision in my mother’s way? I’m not so sure. The reason I’d always choose to give the kidney to my mother is not by obligation, but rather by preference, because of my affective ties to her. If we strip the affect away, I’m not sure that I feel more “obligated” to help my mother than I do to help the stranger. Because in the purest sense, the obligation *to save a life* or better to *prevent a death* is the same, in nature and intensity, towards both my mother and the stranger. The difference lies in the degree of affect, and therefore my preference for one over the other.

If the choice was between 2 strangers, then I’d be faced with a choice that relied upon predominantly objective factors, and it wouldn’t affect me as much; in the same way, if the choice was between 2 very good friends, my decision would be based upon mostly subjective factors and the outcome would have a far greater impact on me.

Coming back to the choice between my mother and a stranger, if we are to say that the decision only depends upon a stronger sense of “obligation” towards my mother, then that means, in other words, that I am less obliged not to kill a stranger than I am not to kill my mother. Even though one could recognize that killing one’s own mother is a more gruesome act than killing a stranger, it seems dangerous to say that one had less an obligation to avoid killing the stranger. In this sense, it seems morally relevant and important to recognize that the “obligation” is the same towards everyone, and that the presence of other elements in the equation is what allows people to make their decisions, with a degree of affect probably being the strongest possible claim one can have.

This leads to another question: seen as our relationships are entirely arbitrary (we are born into a family, our relationships stem most of the time from luck, coincidence, randomness...), should we be *allowed* to hold a preference when deciding who we “help”? It seems to me that this touches upon a greater question about what life is and should be about? Do we hold social interaction and affective ties to be an *essential* part of living a life, so much so that it should be held in higher stand than the necessity for impartiality and global equality?

In a Manichean view of things, we could say that we have to choose between:

- A social/affective life in an unequal and partial world.
- An unsocial/impersonal life in a strictly equal and impartial world.

But surely there's a midway, a compromise. Are we to think that leading social lives is incompatible with a harmonious world? No. What seems to be the problem is the state of affairs the world is currently in, which necessitates a readjusting of our obligations in regards to bringing greater equality in the world.

This opens up a whole new can of worms, because the needs of people around the world vary greatly. How can we, concretely, effectively, realistically, reorganize the concentric circles model when its components aren't necessarily the same across the world (people in 2 different parts of the world don't have the same resources or the same needs; if we were to drop Bill Gates in the middle of a poverty stricken village in Uganda, how would he organize his concentric circles for a new life and how would people profit from it?) I'm afraid that the ideas I'm putting forward here may suffer from ethnocentrism. However, I feel that, beyond the different ways in which people live and express each other, the social pattern of the concentric circles is pretty much the same all over the world.

But we have to confront a problem here which has been underlying this whole reflection: the link between the obligation itself and how it actually physically expresses itself, in the real world. On this point, we have to make a difference between:

- Help (attention, time, effort and resources) that is given by one's own willingness to do so:
 - o Gifts for my family and friends, going to the pub with my colleagues, going on holiday with my girlfriend, etc... → these are almost "**natural obligations**", the necessity to be socially active.
 - o Coins I give to a beggar, contributions I could make to charities, supporting a childcare campaign, etc... → these are "**self-imposed obligations**", we are compelled to do so but have no real punishment if we don't; if we recognize these obligations and fail to do them, we (as part of an opinionated society) morally condemn ourselves for not doing them. The fact that only a minority of people choose to recognize these obligations tends to justify their distinction from natural obligations.
- Help that is given by convention: taxes, mandatory community work → these are "**imposed obligations**" which come from an external force that will punish if we fail to comply.

If we have to readjust the concentric circle model, what kind of obligations are going to be affected? On the one hand, can we change the nature of the obligations (for example, extend our conception of "natural obligations" so that they encompass "self-imposed obligations")? This seems a far stretch, simply because it would necessitate a radical change in everyone's mentality. To some extent, it's something that is already been attempted and truth is its only having marginal success. On the other hand, does it mean limiting the amount of "natural obligations" by restricting our desires (because most of our "natural obligations" as I've put them out stem from social desires) in favor of "self-imposed obligations", all this enforced maybe by new and more extensive "imposed obligations"?

I feel like I could go on and on, and I'm not even sure anymore if I have a clear point to make. Plus, I don't want to be sending you something too long either. I think I feel compelled to write about this because I want, like many people, to contribute to finding the elusive solution to global inequality, and I think looking for the root of our obligations to "help" is a good way of doing so. Anyway, I just wanted to know what your take on all this is, maybe you can clear out some of the blurry parts of my reasoning and redirect me for further thought.

Thank you so much,

Olivier