

THE ETHICS OF THE NEIGHBOR

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The papers collected in this special issue began as presentations at the First Annual Natalie Limonick Conference on Jewish Civilization, which was convened by Kenneth Reinhard at the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies in May 2004 and was devoted to the theme “The Ethics of the Neighbor.” This conference was the culmination of a year-long Mellon Sawyer seminar at UCLA on the same theme. The conference took up the concept of the neighbor arising from the biblical injunction to “love the neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) in order to explore both its underpinnings in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic textual traditions and its potential to inform our understanding of social relations and political life. Core questions motivating this inquiry included: Who counts as my “neighbor”? How is love-of-the-neighbor related to the parallel injunction to “love the stranger,” and how is each represented in the Abrahamic religions? What is implied by “love” in the Levitical injunction? The fact that the category of the neighbor evokes everyday interactions, yet does not easily square with those relationships (to family members, kinsmen, fellow citizens, foreigners) that are typically viewed as constitutive by political and social theory, means that it can be a locus for theorizing an ethics or politics apart from classically conceived individual moral obligations or political structures.

This potential is explored from several perspectives in the essays collected in this issue. A theme that runs through all of them is the uncertainty of the boundaries of “neighborhood” and the concomitant uncertainty about identity or belonging, and about what belonging to a given community entails in the way of obligation both to the fellow-member and beyond. Adam Zachary Newton offers a literary exploration of these issues by way of a juxtaposition of texts by Witold Gombrowicz, the writings of Bruno Schulz and the dislocated “neighborhood” produced by the recent struggle over his final creative work, the mural at Drohobycz, and Levinas’s writings of the 1930s. The articles by Kenneth Reinhard and Michael Zank develop in different ways the core idea that neighbor-love in at least one important strain of Jewish thought is not directed at universal fusion but is an expression of difference-to-self (Reinhard), one that in its dilemmas of inclusion actually entails an obligation to dispute and rebuke (Zank). Reinhard’s and Zank’s contributions share with my own piece on Hermann Cohen’s theorizing of love-of-neighbor in terms of law an interest in getting beyond the traditional opposition of law and morality (often inflected with conceptions of Jewish-Christian difference) in order to reveal—in what we may recognize as a true Cohenian spirit—the ethical potential of legal institutions.

The contributions of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, Jack Miles, and Mehnaz Afridi originated in their participation in a roundtable discussion on the concept of the neighbor. Going at times against the grain of dominant traditions of practice and interpretation, the three ask what their respective traditions have to say about the meaning of love-of-neighbor in contemporary political and moral life.

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