THE PRINCIPLE OF PROXIMITY

Series abstract:
These lectures explore the implications of an approach to political community that is not based in any way on ethnic nationalism or cultural affinity. Political community is primarily territorial and it ought to be predicated on the moral significance of the fact that people find themselves clustered in distinct vicinities. People have a compelling obligation to form a political community with those with whom they are, in Kant’s phrase, unavoidably side by side. That is the premise of this series of lectures.

The individual lectures will explore its implications for abstract model-building in political philosophy, for social contract theory, for our ideals of national sovereignty and self-determination, for the mission of state and law in regard to culture, and for the principles that underlie the proper treatment of migrants. The lectures will consider the dangers of nativism and ethnic nationalism, and they will also consider the distorting impact that notions of the specialness of cultural, religious, and ethnic ties can have in individual as well as political morality.

INDIVIDUAL LECTURES

1. Two Models of Political Community (March 15)
How should we think about—how should we model—the grounds of political association? What should be the basis on which the people of the world divide themselves up into distinct political communities? This lecture casts doubt on the proposition that it is a good idea for people to form a community exclusively with those who share some affinity or trust based on culture, language, religion, or ethnicity. It will set out an alternative approach, rooted in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant: people should form political communities with those who are close to them in physical space, particularly those with whom they are most likely or most frequently likely to fight or to be at odds with.
2. The Importance of Proximity (March 16)
Why is proximity important? The answer is that we are likely to have our most frequent and most densely variegated conflicts with those with whom we are (in Kant’s words) “unavoidably side by side.” The management of such conflicts requires not just law (which in principle can regulate even distant conflicts), but law organized densely and with great complexity under the auspices of a state. And the just ordering of these disputes requires a community to be able to discern and grapple with the “big picture” in terms of what John Rawls called “the basic structure” of their society. This lecture will elaborate the proximity principle, and the conception of law and state that it involves, and it will defend the principle against the criticism that it underestimates the importance of pre-existing trust in the formation and the life of political communities.

3. Proximity and Migration (March 22)
Humans are migratory animals. They move around on the face of the earth, and—unless restrictions are imposed—the conditions of proximity will change over time as people approach and leave one another’s vicinity. Does the principle of proximity justify the imposition of any such restrictions? The answer defended in this lecture is “No”: people have no right whatsoever to drive others away from their vicinity simply because they settled there first. To quote a position entertained by Henry Sidgwick, the aim of the establishment of political community is “to maintain order over [a] particular territory ... but not in any way to determine who is to inhabit this territory, or to restrict the enjoyment of its natural advantages to any particular portion of the human race.”

4. “Telescopic Philanthropy” (March 23)
The emphasis in these lectures on proximity as the key to political association might suggest a morality that is opposed to cosmopolitanism and abstract humanism. It might suggest an endorsement of Charles Dickens’ denunciation of the “telescopic philanthropy” of Mrs. Jellyby in Chapter Four of *Bleak House*. But if that denunciation is supposed to mean that our strongest obligations are to family members and others who have special relations of affinity with us, then it is misplaced. That is not what proximity means. In our moral lives, the principle of proximity requires us to pay particular attention to those who happen to be close to us in time and space, irrespective of how they got there or how else they are related to us. The implications of *Bleak House* need to be balanced with those of the story of the Good Samaritan: in the modern world of movement and mingling, there is no telling who one will come to have obligations towards.