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The ethics of refugees

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Abstract

In the face of the desperate plight of refugees, virtually all moral and political philosophers, regardless of their general position on immigration controls, argue that states have a duty to grant asylum: people must not be turned back to countries where they would face persecution or severe human rights violations. Yet this consensus obscures a number of thorny ethical issues raised by the plight of the displaced. In this piece, I want to draw from recent writing in political and ethical theory to bring some of these issues into view. I start by considering what a refugee is, before turning to the question how the obligations of political communities to the displaced are grounded. I then move to consider what societies owe to refugees and the question of international justice in the allocation of asylum. I conclude with a discussion of the moral responsibilities of refugees themselves.