

The Questions

Are borders necessary?

Are borders the only way to ensure security?

How do borders create unnecessary barriers?

How can we improve the bureaucracy of borders?

Could we live in a world of open borders?

How are sovereignty and borders related?

Can a nation exercise power without borders?

How are borders tied to the creation of the nation-state?

How is sovereignty a barrier to activism?

Should activism stop at state line?

How is power related to the drawing of borders?

Who initially drew the plans out for borders and territory?

How is land associated with identity?

Who decides who can immigrate? And, where?

How What ways are people kept from immigrating?

Issues in Contemporary Ethics: Borders

At a Glance

Borders, the lines that divide one state from another, are an important part of sovereignty, domestic policy, and international relations, at least since the Treaty of Westphalia. Security checkpoints, passports, and immigration bureaucracy have become a norm of everyday travel and life. While this may be a part of the travelling process for the most privileged, this brief seeks to explore the ethical dimensions of borders when it comes to refugee crises.



Anti-immigration fence on the Hungarian border (Balogh 2017)

Case Study: Hungary's Policy on Refugees

Alongside the rise of populism in Hungary, the political discourse surrounding migrants, specifically Muslims, has become increasingly aggressive some far-right movements have xenophobic sentiments. "According to a [2016] Pew Research Centre survey, 72% of Hungarians" view Islam in a "negative light" (Sayfo 2016). This can be reflected when Prime Minister Viktor Orban called Islam a "poison" that threatens the culture and security of Europe (McLaughlin 2016). This, along with their anti-refugee infrastructure, sends a clear message: they do not want Muslims in their country. To further exemplify this, Hungary has been very accepting of Christian refugees from Egypt, with diplomats being active in the European Union (EU) about concerns surrounding Christian minority groups and their importance to Europe.

Implications

The clear difference in treatment based on religion can stem from a couple of factors, such as racism and xenophobia, but an interesting perspective to take is the ethical argument of cultural values and majority rules. Hungary claims Christian historical and cultural heritage with the majority of their population being affiliated with Christianity. This raises the question of whether or not it is ethical for them to want to maintain their culture by shutting out non-Christian people from entry. Afterall, it can be argued that they can control what they wish within their borders. Should any country be forced to open them? Another thing to consider is democratic principles. If the majority votes to not let Muslims in, is that ethical? Or is it simply a tyranny of the majority? In the next section, we use ethical theories to explore these questions.

Further Reading

[Asylum Information Database](#)

[Statistics: Hungary](#)

[World Atlas](#)

[Religious Beliefs in Hungary](#)

[History.com](#)

[Castro Announces Mariel Boatlift](#)

[Rationally Speaking \(podcast\)](#)

[Bryan Caplan on “The Case for Open Borders”](#)

[David T. Jones](#)

[Open Borders and Closing Threats](#)

[Patti Tamara Lenard Culture, Free Movement, and Open Borders](#)

[Irina Molodikova \(book chapter\)](#)

[Hungary and the System of European Transit Migration](#)

[Danish Institute for International Studies Challenges for Human Security](#)

[John Ibister](#)

[A Liberal Argument For Borden Controls: Reply to Carens](#)

[Angela Nagle](#)

[The Left Case against Open Borders](#)

Comparing Perspectives

Ethical theories have been divided into rationalist theories and alternatives to them. Rationalist theories include: deontological, utilitarian, contractualist and discourse ethics. Alternatives include virtue ethics, feminist ethics, postcolonial, and postmodern ethics. In this series of Briefs, one rationalist and one alternative will be explored to present contrasting views on the issue raised.

Contractualism

Contractualism bases morality on a contract between parties in a sort of general agreement on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. It is similar to Rousseau’s social contract whereby everyone agrees to a set of principles that society should abide by. In the context of borders, the society would be a state and those that agree to the contract are citizens. If the government were to have a referendum or poll about refugee immigration, with the majority of people being against accepting refugees, does the government then have an obligation to represent the will of its people? Furthermore, if we look at the Treaty of Westphalia, the concept of sovereignty within a state’s own borders has become a norm in international law; under contractualism, the international community generally respects that, but what if it contravenes other internationally accepted norms?

Postmodernism

Postmodern ethics challenges uniform definitions of morality and perceptions of reality. It questions how different ethical theories apply a moral standard on other people when the moral standard itself is subject to interpretation. This perspective takes into account how different cultures perceive things as right or wrong; in some regards, this is similar to ethical relativism. Applying this to the concept of borders, one could argue that what happens inside state borders is the business of the state and its people. It would then be difficult to pass value judgements on them even if to one’s own culture it is appalling. Of course, postmodernism is not spineless. It is a powerful critique of a unilateral system of ethics that often comes from top-down methods of justification and the imbalance of power associated from that.

Questions for Reflection

What is a just society? Is it one where majority interests and harmony are protected? Or is it one where minority groups can be seen just as important, no matter the interest? When making a value judgement, is that asserting that there is one, true standard for ethics? States are able to discriminate who comes into their country, and regularly do. Hungary is one example of doing so based on religious affiliation, which some may seem as immoral. However, countries like Canada discriminate as well, albeit in a different way: it has a points-based system that gives points based on expertise, skill, education, affluence, family status, age, language, and a whole other host of factors. You can read about them [here](#). How are these forms of discrimination different from religion?

Dunai, Marton. “Hungary Builds New High-Tech Border Fence – with Few Migrants in Sight.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 Mar. 2017

Sayfo, Omar & pall, Zoltan. (2016). [Why an anti-Islam campaign has taken root in Hungary, a country with few Muslims.](#)

McLaughlin, Daniel. “Hungary to Help Christians While Rejecting Muslim Migrants.” *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 27 Sept. 2016