

Avery Kolers

A Moral Theory of Solidarity

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Reviewed by Thomas J. Donahue, 2019

Why *A Moral Theory of Solidarity*? Because, this book tells us, no one has yet theorized solidarity against injustice as itself a moral duty. We have available several accounts of the duties we acquire upon entering such solidarity, which I shall also call "political solidarity." Indeed, most of these accounts are self-consciously feminist (hooks 1986; Dean 1996; Bartky 2002; Mohanty 2003; Gould 2007), such that to offer a real alternative to prevailing views of political solidarity, one must grapple with these works and their feminist commitments, as indeed this book does. Of those available in English, the most systematic account of the duties we acquire once we enter political solidarity is perhaps that offered in Sally Scholz's *Political Solidarity* (2008). But accounts of political solidarity that center on a duty to enter it are few and far between. Andrea Sangiovanni does briefly ground solidarity in what John Rawls called "the natural duty of justice" (Rawls 1971; Sangiovanni 2015) to which all individuals are subject. Rawls himself does say that the third of his principles of justice (the difference principle) is his account of solidarity or "fraternity." But Rawls applies those principles only to the basic structure of society, not to individual interactions, so they are not moral duties in the ordinary sense. Tommie Shelby, dealing exclusively with black solidarity against anti-black oppression, does not claim that racial Blacks' reason for entering such solidarity is any moral duty requiring it: rather, the reason is their common interest in abolishing such oppression (Shelby 2005). Indeed, many leading accounts of political solidarity deny that there is any moral duty to enter such solidarity: Jodi Dean explicitly rejects any such duty, and Scholz seems to deny that there is one (Dean 1996, 21; Scholz 2008, 254).

By contrast, the theory presented in this book centers on a moral duty to enter political solidarity: the duty of (structural) equity. According to this book, we owe everyone perfect duties of equity, that is, we have a perfect duty to give them the bare minimum of equal treatment. This duty is central to Kantian fundamental fairness, and it is tied to Rawls's natural duty of justice (107). Equity, in turn, implies another perfect duty: we must oppose the inequity done to whoever is treated most inequitably in a given political conflict or structure, we must defer both to their epistemic judgments about how the inequity works and to their practical judgments about how best to oppose it, and we must share their fate insofar as the inequity continues to victimize them. This duty, the theory claims, is the ground for political solidarity. The duty is perfect in Kant's sense of a duty that we must always do, and whose moral content specifies exactly how we must do it: such duties leave us no room for interpreting how and when we might best do them. Hence solidarity is not, as many might think, an imperfect duty: a duty we ought sometimes and in some circumstances to do, and that allows us leeway in deciding how and when to best do it. Indeed, the book suggests that there are basically only two moral guides to challenging an injustice done to others: solidarity and conscience. It then argues that conscience is an unreliable guide to understanding and challenging injustice. For conscience is a moral impulse, subject to demands of consistency and responsiveness to reasons (12), that is focused primarily on maintaining the agent's own moral integrity (24). Conscience has a built-in parochialism: it allows conscientious agents to shut their ears and eyes and stop adjusting to new and unfamiliar facts and reasons. Hence we need an

alternative guide to challenging injustice, and the only one available is solidarity--a solidarity that has overcome the biases of conscience and is thus ready to defer to the victims of injustice.

This last claim is controversial and novel. Most normative theories of solidarity against injustice say that solidary agents can specify what such solidarity requires of them in this or that circumstance after reflective or democratic discourse with others (Dean 1996; Scholz 2008), and that these procedures give the agent some leeway to decide how she can best be solidary (Shelby 2005). This book rejects such discretion when it comes to the nonvictims of injustice being solidary with the victims. On this book's theory, solidary nonvictims, as we shall see in a moment, must defer to the victims.

There is another way that the book offers a *moral* theory of solidarity: it claims that the rallying point for solidarity against injustice involves valuing the agency of the objects of your solidarity (63), and that the rallying point ought to be a moral duty that is owed to the injustice's victims (chapter 6). Moreover, the book claims that the ground of solidarity is deontological: we should be solidary with the victims of injustice because of the duties we owe to them as persons, not because of any reasons we have to bring about states of affairs. The book thus rejects more teleological and political approaches to solidarity, which see the rallying point as a shared end or goal or interest, which ground it in the end of abolishing oppression (that is, in bringing about a state of affairs), and which therefore use means-ends reasoning to achieve those ends or goals (for example, hooks 1986; Mohanty 2003; Shelby 2005; Scholz 2008). "Solidarity," says this book, is a "principle of how one ought to treat people rather than what goals one should pursue" (119).

Also striking is that the book models political solidarity on legitimate authority. The book's theory urges us to see political solidarity as analogous to the deference we owe to legitimate practical authorities. Indeed, the theory's root metaphor is *solidarity as deference*, where *deference* is glossed as *political action on others' terms* (46). In this, the theory diverges from Scholz's, with its root metaphor of *solidarity as shared commitment to challenging oppression* (Scholz 2008) and from Andrea Sangiovanni's theory, with its metaphor of *solidarity as joint action or shared agency aimed at overcoming some significant adversity* (Sangiovanni 2015) and also from Carol Gould's theory, with its metaphor of *(transnational political) solidarity as social empathy and sympathy requiring deference and cooperation and aimed at challenging injustice* (Gould 2007). By contrast, this book says, "In solidarity we act as others direct or would direct--in effect, we act as their understudy or their surrogate. If I am in solidarity with you then I am disposed to act, on the front end, as you would, and I am disposed to accept, on the back end, the same treatment as you receive. Thus the definition captures both deference in the choice of action and shared fate in the acceptance of consequences" (6).

Interpreting solidarity as deference has profound implications. For one, the theory suggests that we should eliminate and replace a concept now widely used in discussions of solidarity: that of *an ally*. In these discussions, people are allies if they are solidary with the victims of an oppression but are not themselves its victims. This book's theory suggests that those who are not themselves victims of an injustice but are genuinely solidary with the victims should not be conceptualized as the victims' *allies*, but rather as their *surrogates* or *deputies*. For they have not forged an alliance or coalition of common interests with the victims; rather, they have committed themselves to act as the victims would in challenging the injustice. Coupled with this replacement is an important shift in conceptual frameworks. The book urges us to move the concept of solidarity out of frameworks that see it in terms of associations that advance shared purposes and shared interests. Instead, the book urges, we should move the concept

of solidarity into frameworks that see it in terms of authorization by legitimate authority.

So much for the book's motivations and main interpretive moves. I will now survey the main claims of its theory of solidarity. Among normative theorists of solidarity, there is an emerging consensus that explications of political solidarity must take a position on five issues. First, they must specify political solidarity's conceptual core. What is it to be in such solidarity? What model or analogy or framework is useful for understanding it? What core duties, commitments, or attitudes does it require? I have already presented this theory's answers to those questions, as well as those offered by the leading alternative theories. However, it is worth noting that this theory centers on two widely recognized duties of solidarity against oppression: that the non-victims of oppression should shut up and listen to the victims, and that the non-victims should share fate with the victims when the oppression again moves to harm them. The theory's accounts of deference on the front end and on the back end explicate those two duties. Moreover, the theory maintains that solidarity is fundamentally a matter of taking sides in a political struggle: we first take sides, says the theory; only afterwards do we decide whether that side's ends and means are ones that we endorse: solidarity, in the book's term, is "agonistic": a matter of being *on side* (38-40). The theory tempers this seeming prohibition on all discretion by allowing solidary agents to privately try to argue the victims out of their plans, albeit once the plan is set, they must defer; and it also allows solidary agents to refuse to defer when the victims' plans would directly harm those who are even less well off than they (101).

The second issue that normative theories of political solidarity should illuminate is the grounds for entering such solidarity. What is or should be the reason for being in political solidarity? Is that reason a moral requirement, or some other kind of reason? I have already sketched the book's theory of the grounds for becoming solidary: the duty of (structural) equity. In this, it diverges from, for example, Scholz's theory, which holds that it is the shared commitment to the goal of challenging an injustice that compels people to solidarity against it (Scholz 2008, 134, 195-97).

Third, normative theories of political solidarity must identify its agents. Who is, or who should be, the agents who enter into political solidarity? For Kolers's theory, these morally ought to be those who are not the victims of an injustice, and yet are positioned to do something about it. Moreover, the agents of solidarity in Kolers's sense *cannot* be the victims of the injustice. Solidarity, on Kolers's account, requires deference to the victims of the injustice, and it also seems to require that the victims *not* defer to the nonvictims. So there cannot be genuine solidarity of the victims of an injustice with any of its non-victims. Solidarity, in Kolers's phrase, is "asymmetric" between the victims and the non-victims (61). In this, the theory differs markedly from the claims made by Scholz's theory, which holds that symmetric solidarity between victims and non-victims is possible and often desirable (Scholz 2008, 160-64).

Fourth, normative theories of solidarity must identify the objects of solidarity. With whom should the agents be solidary? What sorts of duties do the agents owe to the objects of their solidarity? Again, on the theory presented here, the objects of our solidarity should in general be those persons who are treated most inequitably in a political conflict or structure. This position contrasts with that of Scholz, which suggests that the primary objects of our solidarity are those persons who join with us in the solidary collective, sharing our goal of challenging an injustice through a united front (Scholz 2008, 100-07, chapter 4).

Fifth, a normative theory must identify solidarity's organizing principles and its chief means. Solidarity is in some sense a commitment to joint action, so what forms should that action

take? How should it be organized? What sorts of duties do the agents owe one another as part of that joint action? For this book, the organizing principles seem to be the perfect duty of equity, its consequent duty of deference to the victims, and a duty to organize and coordinate a solidarity movement with distinct tasks allocated to each member (63-69, 144-48). These suggestions diverge from those of a theory like Sangiovanni's, which says that the solidary agents owe one another the meshing of their plans for achieving the shared goal, such that they don't undermine one another; and that they share one another's fates in ways relevant to the shared goal (Sangiovanni 2015, 343). They also contrast with those of Scholz, which holds that solidary actions should take the forms of hope, activism, consciousness-raising, social criticism, listening to and learning from the victims of injustice, and nonviolence, and that the duties and organizing principles solidary groups owe one another internally include cooperation, mutuality, equality, reciprocity, and democratic decision-making (Scholz 2008, chapters 3, 4).

Those, then, are the main claims of this book's theory. The theory has many merits. One is that its deontological approach to solidarity offers a real alternative to leading accounts of solidarity, which tend toward a more teleological, means-ends approach. Another merit is that the theory subversively transmutes two political outlooks. On the one hand, it subversively transmutes Kantian-deontological liberalism, because it makes political solidarity conceptually safe for such liberalism, interpreting it in terms of familiar Kantian concepts like *equal respect*, *the difference principle*, *deference to legitimate political authority*, and yet it gives radically different meanings to those concepts than does established Kantian liberalism. The theory is faithful to such liberalism's official core moral and conceptual commitments, but transmutes most of its subsidiary moral, conceptual, and empirical assumptions. On the other hand, the theory also subversively transmutes the established form of anti-oppression solidary politics. For while it makes Kantian individualist liberalism conceptually safe for such politics, by showing that it can be interpreted to require a rigorous form of solidarity against injustice, it thereby gives radically different meanings to the core concepts of that politics: *solidary commitments*, *heeding the victims of injustice*, *challenging oppression*. Hence it also transmutes most of that politics' subsidiary moral, conceptual, and empirical assumptions.

My remaining doubts concern the dichotomy between following one's conscience and acting in surrogacy-deference. Aren't there other guides to challenging injustice besides those two? Why can't one defer to victims' diagnoses of the injustice--epistemic deference--without deferring to their chosen remedies--surrogate deference? And why isn't deference to the democratic state yet another such alternative? I can find no argument in this book explaining why defenders of either alternative, or indeed of other kinds of authority, could not grant Kolers's theory all of its claims, conceding that there is a perfect duty of surrogacy deference to the victims, that such deference should always overcome conscience, and yet maintain that when the demands of their favored form of authority conflict with those of the victims, then their authority's demands should win out.

Perhaps, however, the theory seeks only to show that there is a perfect duty of surrogacy deference to the victims of injustice, and that this duty trumps those of sovereign conscience, but not that it trumps other duties we have, like the duty to respect the outcomes of democratic decision-making. For the theory models the demand for solidarity as a situation in which an individual agent hears a call for solidarity from an individual victim or a victim group, and must balance that call against the demands of their individual conscience. The theory thus says little about how the agent should balance that demand against those made on them by the other groups that have authority for them: their state, their church, their work

organization, to name a few. Hence we have another way in which the theory is distinctively *moral*: it models the potentially solidary agent as acting free of the demands of organized authorities; it assumes a largely individualist setting in which the individual must decide whether to perform on their duties of solidarity. But how are we to apply that model to our current world, where organized authorities of all kinds loom ever larger and seem to make ever more incompatible demands on us?

Although this book may lack a complete answer to that question, one of its great merits is that it takes us a good deal of the way toward an answer. For this, and much more, students of solidarity owe Avery Kolers congratulations and thanks.

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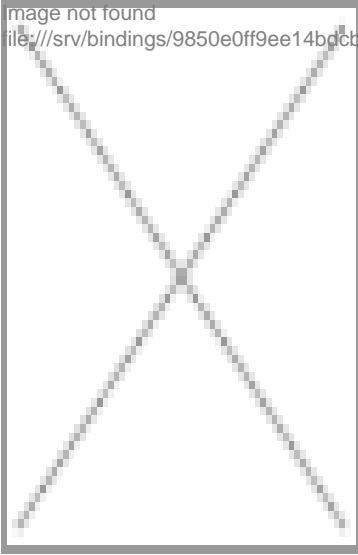
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Thomas J. Donahue is a visiting assistant professor of political science at Haverford College. He is the author of *Unfreedom for All: How Global Injustices Harm You* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).



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