Abstract

The idea of a universal duty to love all human beings just because they are persons is deeply embedded in the religious and philosophical roots of Unitarian Universalism. As usually understood, this duty is unchanging, although how it applies to particular cases might change as circumstances change. These discussions will explore a more radical idea: that our responsibilities to persons in the present and the future is deeply affected by the actions of others in the past. This includes not only past injustices and suffering, but also positive contributions to justice and human welfare whose meaning for the future only we can determine. An essential part of the purpose of our lives must be to ensure that past sacrifices will not be for nothing, that their meaning will endure and grow. We are today's stewards of the past. Once the full implications of this are understood, it becomes clearer why the popular libertarian political ideologies of our time are false: human beings cannot regard themselves just as separate individuals who start out owing nothing to the rest of humanity unless they freely undertake some role or relationship. Rather, from the very beginning, we are enmeshed in historical duties that we cannot authentically ignore. As we look to the present, we realize that we cannot live up to the awesome responsibility that history has placed on us only by caring for particular individuals with a close relationship to our lives, or who cross our path. Authentic agape requires caring about institutional justice. And in the final analysis, we see that nothing less than total justice on a global scale could ever be an adequate to our shared past.

First Talk: Being With The Dead (January 6, 2002)

I. Introduction

The topic for this series is the relationship between moral responsibility and history, looking at the past, present, and future, and I want to give a brief summary to explain what this means. In philosophy these days, many different theories of morality have been developed to a high degree of sophistication. In particular, utilitarianism holds that right actions are those which maximize collective or total happiness for human beings (or sometimes for all sentient creatures). In sharp contrast, Kantian or (more generally) deontological theories hold that right actions are ones that intentionally respect each individual person as an end-in-themselves, and so could be consistently approved by all rational persons, or accepted from an impartial viewpoint. The ideas I hope to develop in discussion with you belong to a different moral tradition — to which these philosophical theories are certainly indebted — but which conceives the moral ideal of human
life in distinctive terms as an the requirement of universal love for all persons, or as generous regard for the well-being of each individual. This kind of concern for every person just because they are a person has traditionally been called neighbor-love, or agape, and for theologians starting from the Bible (for example in St. Augustine, or Kierkegaard, or Martin Buber) it was traditionally based on the infinite and inalienable value that each person has because they are made “in the image” of God, no matter what other features distinguish their character or personality. This idea is well-known, but how to interpret and apply it are quite controversial.

II. The Significance of History for Moral Responsibility

Now my main goal here is not to develop a philosophical argument for this kind of agape ethics against competing moral theories, or to ask whether justifying neighbor-love as our highest principle requires starting from revealed religion, e.g. the doctrine that each individual’s freedom and capacity for moral agency reflects the divine nature of their creator. Instead I want to see if it is possible to develop the basic ideal of agape ethics in a new way that is both intuitively understandable and less dependent on revealed teachings. This atheological approach starts from the idea that the reason why we must love our neighbors, as well as what it takes to love them fully, is deeply affected by the shape of human actions in the past, and the potential forms of human relationships and institutions we can imagine as real possibilities for the middle-term future (meaning, not tomorrow or the immediate future next year, nor the long-term future thousands or millions of years hence, but the envisionable future between these extremes).

To clarify this basic idea of an historical agape ethics, it will help to contrast it with a better-known view. According to the leading Kantian and utilitarian interpretations of morality, as well as most familiar theological interpretations of the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, moral principles are in essence timeless, like principles of logic and mathematics. How they apply to our particular case will certainly depend on contingencies of our time and place, and of course our understanding of these norms may improve over time, but the principles themselves are taken to be abstract entities that are essentially unchanging, like Plato’s forms.

For example, it might be part of natural moral law that if I make a promise, I ought to keep it barring emergencies, or that if I father or mother children, I ought to care for them if there is any way I possibly can. Likewise, if I sign a legitimate contract, I’m ordinarily bound by its conditions. In each of these cases, my particular duties are determined by my voluntary undertakings in the past. These are apparently just instantiations of timeless precepts. The specific obligations I have depend on the concrete details of the promises I’ve made or the actions I’ve performed – but that’s because these details fill in the value of variables in the atemporal principle or moral rule.

A different notion says that each culture develops moral ideals appropriate to its own era, but in this historicist version of cultural relativism again, the view is not that our responsibilities now are directly tied to the accomplishments and errors of previous eras. Rather we cannot compare cultures according to any overarching standard or see history in terms of moral progress. As a result, this kind of historicism is deeply problematic, for we cannot understand history at all without ethical comparisons. As dangerous as such judgments are, they are unavoidable, for the notions of progress and regress are fundamental to any human understanding of our development.

These dominant views --the Platonic and the historicist-- have, I believe, largely blinded our best moral thinkers to the fundamental importance of human history for understanding our most basic responsibilities. I propose instead that our duties are deeply conditioned not only by
our own actions, but also by choices that others have made in the past, often long before our birth. Our duties are in part constituted by what we owe to the past, and they are not best understood simply as particular exemplifications of time-neutral principles applying equally to all. In particular, how we experience the responsibilities of neighbor-love is dramatically shaped both by wide currents in historical development as well as by the actions of singular individuals who we find especially significant for understanding our own place in the human pageant.

In this approach, I’m borrowing freely from Alasdair MacIntyre, a contemporary philosopher who has argued that human beings can only understand their actions and intentions as part of a narrative or story in which different plot-lines intersect. In general, and from the beginning of our lives, we always find ourselves involuntarily involved in a number of historical threads, smaller or larger-scale ongoing stories, which we did not create. We are inevitably invested in these living, nonfictional stories, even though we may not even have chosen to have a part in them. Moreover, these nested narratives, from our most local level to the most embracing overall story of human history, provide the inescapable frame for human self-understanding.

Our freedom plays several important roles in this narrative account of our place in the human world. We initiate new stories, help continue old ones in new directions, enter ongoing plot-lines voluntarily. We also determine how to interpret the past, what its important moments and figures are for us. How we relate to the past, what we focus on and what we ignore, is directly linked to how we understand ourselves, and what part we do, could, and should play in web of ongoing narratives that make up our lifeworld. But none of these crucial interpretive acts, which we are performing all the time, can we accomplish entirely by ourselves, or simply by arbitrary fiat. The motives behind our decisions depend on the significance we think our actions could have for current and future possibilities as seen against the background of our past—meaning here not just our individual life-story to date, but rather the whole of human history as we see it with practical interest, as it is alive with meaning for us, or instead dead and insignificant to us. For some people, of course, live with very little existential awareness of the past. They may know a lot of historical ‘facts’ as trivia, but they find virtually no significance in them for directing their own life. I see this common phenomenon as extremely problematic. Living with no existential consciousness of the past, or living without history mattering much to us, must on my view amount to living in a kind of moral numbness that ethically disabling. Such a person, I will argue, cannot fully love others as they ought to, for they have not taken to heart how the love and hatred of those departed have shaped their world, making their own projects possible. This is why in Charles Dickens’s The Christmas Carol, Scrooge’s redemption has to begin with the Ghost of Christmas past. If we are to love others now, we too must confront our personal past and the past of our culture. Most of all, we must recognize our debts to the past.

My central thesis can be stated quite simply, although its full implications won’t be immediately apparent: Our duty to love others living now and in the future depends above all on the historical fact that we have been loved, and our ability to love others as our neighbors depends on existential recognition of this past love, in which we take it to heart and cherish it as the ground of our very possibility of being human at all. There are three dimensions to this fact.

-- First, during our own lifetimes all of us have received some nurturing, however imperfect, or we would not be here. Most of us have received the sustained care and attention of parents, teachers, and others who helped raise us. Now some people have suffered terrible wrongs at the hands of those who should have nurtured them, and beyond this, the sorts of
love we have received from our families vary in innumerable ways that are easily distorted
if quantified and compared. But each of us has felt our absolute need for this kind of
nurturing love, if sometimes only by way of emotional pain at its absence.

– Second, and crucially for me, we have all been the beneficiaries of countless acts of love
and sacrifice done both during and long before our lives began, whether we recognize it or
not. The full depth of these benefits, the full extent of our debt to the past, is rarely
appreciated even by the most thoughtful person. Even those of us who have not received
adequate love from our families or from our wider communities, have still in a different
way (which I hope to make clear) been loved by humanity itself, probably far more than
we’ll ever guess. We are all pearls of great price, purchased at unimaginable cost by so
many people, most of whom we’ll never know.

– Finally, for theists who believe in a personal God, there will be an added dimension here. I
hold a belief typical of such theists, namely that God as creator has shown a kind of
transcendent love just in giving us being. Different theists will understand this in slightly
different ways. For Christians, for example, there is added to this general idea the more
specific faith that Jesus has loved us so much as to die for us, to take our place, to show us
infinite mercy.

Those who do not believe this Christian teaching as a literal truth may still see it as metaphor for
the idea that we must love others because we have been loved, that in this sense as in the others
listed above, agape is both required and enabled by history. Charles Dickens saw this so clearly
when he wrote his famous novel, The Tale of Two Cities, which is a story of eros turning into
agape. The hero, Sydney Carton, saves his beloved’s lover from the guillotine by taking his
place. And the novel ends with the grandson of the couple saved by Carton coming back to the
place of Carton’s sacrifice, and hearing his story. And this is because to love those living now,
and those who are yet to be, requires first that we remember the past, and love our dead in deep
thankfulness, sometimes even in awe.

III. Being with the Dead: An Evocation of the Past

Maybe it was Dickens’s inspiration that led another favorite author of mine, Stephen
Donaldson, to declare that the purpose of life is to give meaning to the sacrifices of others. In
particular, he teaches that it is our duty to find and develop what was valuable and right in the
sacrifices of the dead. But what exactly does this mean?

We are more familiar with the idea that past injustices must be corrected to the extent
possible, even when we did not cause them. For example, Germany still pays reparations to
Israel for the Holocaust. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s
controversial work involved confronting the past and setting the record straight, even at the cost
of granting amnesty to officials who violated basic human rights in the most grievous ways. And
here in the United States, affirmative action may to some extent address the legacy of racism.
For even if we have benefitted quite involuntarily from some past wrong, we are responsible to
do what we can to rectify it, even at cost to ourselves. If I discover that my grandfather stole a
million dollars from your grandfather, and I have inherited some portion of that money, I may
have done nothing wrong, but I’m still responsible for making things right with you, however
exactly we might work it out. In this light, one shudders to think what kind of soul-searching
good Israelis and Palestinians decades from now will have to go through in confronting their
cultures’s mutual past.

Moreover, we have all committed wrongs in our own personal past, and what we ought to
do for others in the present and future involves coming to terms with these errors in some way. If
you want to see this idea in film, I recommend the movie *Flatliners*, which is about confronting
our sins (and sins done against us) and finding redemption. I could also cite that great moment in
the movie *Gandhi* (which could perhaps help in negotiation between India and Pakistan now)
when the Hindu man confesses that he has killed a Muslim baby and asks forgiveness. Gandhi
tells him to find and raise an orphan child, but to make sure that it is a Muslim child.

But victims of past injustice should have another kind of effect on how we experience and
interpret our responsibilities today. For even if we did not commit the wrong or benefit
involuntarily from the harm done, it is still *up to us* collectively to ensure that these victims did
not suffer and die for nothing, that their loss is given enduring moral meaning. This means not
only that the world should learn its lesson from what they endured (or adhere more loyally to
timeless moral principles), but also that we have a *direct responsibility to these victims* to do all
we can to ensure that new life, new hope, and the promise of greater justice comes out of their
pain. We do not live under the Homeric blood-feud honor code: responsibility to victims of past
injustice does not mean avenging them, but it does mean keeping faith with them, never
forgetting. Thus to take just one of so many painful examples, when in the mid-1990s the leaders
of Europe and the United States stood idly by and allowed the fascists who then controlled Serbia
to murder thousands of Bosnians, when our joint UN force in Yugoslavia withdrew and allowed
a Serbian paramilitary force to enter the refugee camp at Srebrenica, knowing full well that they
would commit mass murder there, Europe and the United States committed more than one
wrong. It is a terrible, nearly unforgivable sin to stand idly by the blood of one’s neighbor, to
allow murder we can prevent at any time. But we violated more than this timeless precept. We
also directly betrayed the millions of Jews who died in Auschwitz and Dachau and Treblinka, all
those nameless voices whose deaths it is our special historical destiny and never-ending duty to
fill with moral significance today. We betrayed our own grandfathers, who risked and laid down
their lives in World War II to prove that some evils can never be allowed to stand. In such
failures, it is as if we make their sacrifices into *nothing*; we deny and reject them as surely as
Peter denied Christ three times before the cock crowed. We act as if we had nothing to do with
them, when it is only because of them that we can live as free and independent persons.

Consider in this light, if you have the courage, the end of *Saving Private Ryan*. What Ryan
rightly judges that he owes to Captain John Miller is not simply some anonymous duty that
comes from a timeless principle applied to his situation. Rather, he believes that the good of his
life must be a direct response to *Miller himself*, an answer to his own unique and specific
sacrifice. There are other possible answers he could have given – running away, fleeing from the
memory, for example– but there is only one possible authentic answer. Yet he trembles at
Miller’s grave because he sees so clearly that no life, however good, could ever be a complete
answer, if that means an equaling of the scales. To the significant others of our past we will
always be in a debt that cannot be ‘discharged,’ and so we must give up even thinking of our
good works as repayment or compensation to them.

As this difficult example suggests, our responsibility is also positively affected and
strengthened by good actions in the past. The conditioning of responsibility by the past is not
exhausted by the idea that we must accept collective responsibility for past injustices and making sure that their victims are not forgotten. We also have to recognize the intentional sacrifices of past heros, both sung and unsung, whose actions have made a better life possible for us. Only we can determine how these positive contributions to justice and human welfare will be received in the present and extended into the future. In first-personal terms I translate that as follows: Whatever else we do, whatever our more particular commitments, the essential underlying purpose of our lives must be to ensure that past sacrifices will not be for nothing, that their meaning will endure and grow. It is our first responsibility to take the positive legacy of the past, this accumulated endowment of human good, and pass it on enriched by our own contributions to the next generations. We are today’s stewards of past: all the good that has been done on earth now looks to us for fulfillment. We can live up to this responsibility in many different ways:

- we can advance the professions in which we work, striving to reach new heights of excellence by building on the insight and innovation of past geniuses;
- we can work to find new truth and better understanding, building on the wisdom and insights gained in the past;
- we can teach our children about those who have gone before, what they did for us, and how we can honor them by continuing their work, making their sacrifices go ever farther towards improving the human condition;
- We can recognize those particular heros who have special significance for us as individuals, who inspire us to excel, who remind us of why life is worth living, who call us back to the works of love that can only be done by us. We may think here of a parent, or grandparent, that special teacher or friend who believed in us, or of a figure from history who looms large in our consciousness. For example, Abraham Lincoln is such a person for me.

The person who genuinely loves her neighbors thus sees all her most vital activities and commitments as standing in a kind of living alliance with the heros of the past. Through her loyalty, she makes them live again; she re-embodies their values, with her own innovations.

It is important to note that I’m not recommending ancestor-worship here, or proposing a cult of heros of the sort found in archaic societies based on a warrior’s code of honor, like that of Homeric Greece. We can recognize our ancestors’ faults and limitations without denying our debts to them. Agapeistic love for the dead is not an emotion in the sentimental sense: although it must indeed be full of passion, it is at its core an act of rational will: we respect what was right and good in the past, and take it into our hearts, making it the basis for our resolve to love others around us and our determination to build a better world. We can draw such strength of will from the past without falsifying it. For instance, one can find something moving and demanding of personal response in the commitment to justice of men like John, Robert, and Edward Kennedy, despite their many well-known faults. So although they were uncritical, ancestor religions had one thing right in my view: they realized that a sense of the past, and especially a deep appreciation of our relation to particular past individuals, is crucial for responsible living in the present. The same virtue is found in those religious traditions that cultivate a healthy interest in the lives of saints.

This brings us to the crucial question: who are our dead? As we’ve seen, this means not only those who inspire us, but those who we most need to remember, if we are to understand
more fully how we can best love our neighbors today. There are different categories of the dead in this existential sense:

- Some of our dead are, of course, dear friends or relatives whom we have lost in our own lifetimes. Kierkegaard was thinking of this group when he wrote in *Works of Love*, “If we are to love the men we see, then we are also to love those whom we have seen but see no more because death took them away” (tr. Hongs, Harper and Row., p.319).
- Others are particular groups of people we honor, such as victims of the Holocaust, or the freedom riders, or maybe the pilgrims or some other group of pathfinders in the past.
- Yet others may be particular individuals whose place in history has come alive for us, because the significance of their courageous acts of love must be preserved. A woman like Mother Theresa, or a man like Martin Luther King, come to mind here.
- There are others still who haunt us because the enormous harm issuing from their acts of hatred must be prevented as much as possible from reaching into the present and future. The figure of Stalin, for example, ought to haunt us in this way, for the nation he so tortured today desperately needs our help, our brotherly and sisterly love. Yet we have entirely failed to help its people find a way out of their economic nightmare, even though our own nation had no little to do with bringing about the prevailing circumstances in Russia today. Have we also forgotten our debt to their grandfathers and grandmothers for their help in defeating Hitler? Does the past mean so little to us?

To conclude, *being with the dead* sounds like a dark or somber subject for a Sunday morning, but it does not mean sitting in graveyards or reading genealogies. It means recognizing that in loving or neglecting our neighbors now, we are always responding to the dead, one way or the other, in acknowledgment or rejection, whether we see it or not. Rightly understood, what constitutes an appropriate response to our neighbor is at least partially determined by the past. In being with the dead, we acquire a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves, to a march of generations, ancestors, and models whose collective purposes are (in John McCain’s inspired phrase) larger than our self-interest. As Einstein once said of progress in science, we can see further now because we stand on the shoulders of past giants; their insights enable our discoveries. The same is true of moral progress. Therefore, whether we believe in any kind of afterlife or not, *our dead are with us*, always. For the true moral vision, we live in a world that is fully pregnant with the past, literally surrounded by our dead. Our heroes look to us to make all their hopes for humanity come true. And some day, when we have also taken our place in the firmament of the ages, may our lives also fill tomorrow’s children with that deep thankfulness which will support and confirm them, enabling them to love their neighbors even when the toll seems too high to bear, because *we are with them*.

**Second Talk: Caring in the Present** (January 13, 2002)

I. **Introduction: Summary of the last talk**

The goal of this series is to develop an understanding of neighbor-love or agape that takes account of the multiple ways in which our responsibilities in the present, and our duties to the
future, are conditioned and affected by what we owe to the past--both in terms of rectifying past injustices and in terms of honoring and devoting ourselves to the same noble goals pursued by past heros whose sacrifices have benefitted us. In the first talk, I summed this up by saying that we have a fundamental duty to make sure that victims of past injustices, as well as those who have worked and sometimes died for justice and the good of humanity, did not suffer and strive for nothing. This means more than just renewing their memory on occasional holiday celebrations. Through our actions and our whole lives, we have to breathe ever-new life into their sacrifices. For a person with an authentic understanding of neighbor-love, the meaning of life involves this kind of responsibility to the past, and all our duties are conditioned by it.

In this second talk, I want to extend this theme into a fuller discussion of how we should love others in the present, or what agape requires us to give to other persons just because they are persons. (Some of this discussion will connect with things I wrote in a paper about the portrayal of moral responsibility in the movie, Schindler's List). I’ll also touch briefly on some interesting questions posed in contemporary philosophy and theology about the best way to understand agape ethics or the ideal of neighbor-love.

II. Who we are is who we were.

I want to begin by emphasizing an idea that I mentioned only in passing last time, namely that our life makes sense to us only as a kind of narrative or living story that intersects with the stories of others coming out of the past, and going into the future. Not only our responsibilities, but our very identity--our sense of who we are in the world--depends on our ties to the past. This helps explain why, as I asserted, a mature moral agent can only understand how to love others properly in the present when they see that who they are, and what they stand for, must be determined in part by those to whom they own special debts from the past, including their dead. This stands in opposition to a kind of individualism that runs very deep in our American culture. This individualism includes our common belief that a courageous person should stand on his or her own feet, be self-reliant, and not depend on others when it comes to major decisions and crises of life. More deeply, it includes our notion that being true to ourselves means finding our values, our calling, our unique identity within our own heart, rather in our traditions and our ancestry. At the deepest level, this individualism is founded on the belief that being autonomous means not allowing others to determine what our commitments and life-projects should be. Now I don’t mean to reject these values out of hand. There is much to be said for this rugged individualism. But its claims are overstated, and they need to be tempered with the recognition that we would not even have the language in which to define our highest priorities and goals without the communities from which we came. Nor could we have the strength of will to pursue these projects when the going gets rough without turning back to the inspiration of those who have raised, mentored, and encouraged us, and in so many ways sacrificed themselves for us.

This is the discovery found in a powerful scene near the end of another recent Spielberg movie, La Amistad. In case you haven’t seen this wonderful film, let me give you a little background. The Amistad was a slave ship transporting captured Africans to the Caribbean in 1839. In the movie (which somewhat alters the historical details) the slaves, led by the Cinque, take over the ship, slay their Cuban captors, and eventually land in Connecticut. The Africans sue for their freedom while Spain sues to have its stolen “property” returned. Then former President John Quincy Adams, well-played by Anthony Hopkins, represents the Africans before an apparently
hostile Supreme Court. In his final summation to the Court, he explains how his involvement with Cinque has led him to a new understanding of the past:

The other day I was talking with my friend Cinque...When a member of the Mende (that’s his people) faces a situation in which there seems to be no hope at all, he calls on his ancestors. You see, he believes that wisdom and strength they inspired will come to his aid.

[JQA turns from the justices and walks down the line of busts on their pillars in the Supreme Court.] James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, [pause] John Adams. We have long resisted asking you for guidance. Perhaps we feared that an appeal to you would be taken for weakness. But we understand now—we have been made to understand, and to embrace the understanding— that this is not so. Our very individuality, which we so, so reverse, is not entirely our own. Rather, who we are is who we were.

So we desperately need your strength and wisdom. Help us to do what is right, and if it means civil war, then let it come. And when it does may be finally the last battle of the American Revolution.

In other words, to love his African neighbors properly, and to know what to say and what to risk in fighting for justice, John Quincy Adams has to come to terms, finally, with his own father. All his life he has lived in the shadow of the great John Adams, the founding father and second President of the United States. To become his own man, to define his own identity, he felt that he had to make his own way, and achieve independence from his father’s legacy. But now he sees that his individuality is not diminished by reliance on the wisdom and strength of the past. We learn here a lesson that Aristotle knew very well 2300 years ago, one that was also restated by Martin Buber and other 20th century philosophers: to love others well, we must have something to offer them. I do not mean something material, but rather something psychological and volitional. We must have a unified self, a developed sense of value, along with the capacity to stick to our commitments. We must have the house of our own self in order, Aristotle said, before we can be good friends to others (Nicomachean Ethics Bk. VIII). The same goes for agape as universal love: to love others as ourselves, we must first love ourselves in the right way, developing a sense of our self-worth and our capacity to love. This inner strength of character both helps us discern what will best serve those we must care for in the situation, and helps us do what is required. And this means that we must come to terms with our own past, understanding ourselves in terms of the history out of which we come. We cannot be whole, and ready to love others, without embracing our past, and relying on its inspiration. Without this, we will fail ourselves, and thus fail those who need us, at the most important points.

II. Reciprocity

In sum, loving others well in the present requires caring about our own character, trying to achieve the right kind of unity of purpose and conviction in our lives, and this in turn requires a moral sense of history as a source of responsibilities. This view provides a basis for addressing some controversial questions about agape ethics. It implies, for example, that there is a kind of self-love which isn’t selfishness, and that this proper self-love is consistent with and even required for unselfish love of others as persons. It also implies that agapeistic love involves a kind of indirect reciprocity. In loving our neighbors in the present, we do not care for them only so that they will help us in return, but in loving them without thought of our own interests, we are always at the same time responding to the sacrifices of others in the past. We remember what
they have done for us, and we *reciprocate*, not by giving something back to them directly (for what can we give to the dead?), but by upholding the values they suffered to establish and promote, by carrying on their struggles. *We love others now as our heros have loved us in the past.* And we hope that those for whom we sacrifice now, especially the young, will one day reciprocate in turn by loving those entrusted to their care and those who need them in their time, and for their future. This is the living bond between generations.

Whether agape is compatible with a demand for reciprocity has been debated, but only in non-historical terms, in recent scholarship. Philosophers have asked whether, in loving our neighbors, we should expect or require some kind of response from them, some kind of reciprocation. This is important, because one ideal of social justice, which many philosophers today believe best makes sense of liberal democratic institutions, holds that we are willing to restrict our liberties and contribute to the common good on the condition that other citizens will reciprocate or do the same. But such a "sense of justice," as John Rawls called it, is clearly not the same as the selfless generosity to others that characterizes neighbor-love. Many Jewish and Christian writers, including Kierkegaard, have stressed that agapeistic love cannot require others to love us in return, or it would not be entirely unselfish. The saint loves even enemies who she knows will not love her in return, but who may hate her or even kill her. This is not the same as Aristotle’s ideal friendship either, in which the partners trust in each other’s virtue and thus expect the other person’s goodwill, even in while caring about their friend just for the friend’s own sake. There is too much reciprocity in such friendship for it to count as genuine agape, on this view. Other writers have disagreed and argued that, if this self-sacrificial understanding of agape is taken to its extreme, it would imply that loving others as our neighbors means enslaving ourselves to them. Yet others have argued that, while someone who loves his neighbors for their sake alone, without regarding them as a means to his own profit, may not require those he helps and serves to reciprocate, there is certainly nothing wrong with hoping that they will love him back, or hoping that unselfish and generous love will awaken selfless love in return. And loving others generously, caring about their good as an end in itself, doesn’t require tolerating injustices to ourselves or to third parties. We can love our enemies, on this alternative view, even in using force to prevent their committing atrocities, at least if there is no less violent way to stop them.

Although this is a tough question, I agree with parts of both views. In my essay on *Schindler’s List*, I emphasized the idea that in agapeistic love for our neighbors, we cannot find any definite or finite limit to our what we may be required to do for our neighbors, especially in grave circumstances. While the ideal of neighbor-love does not say that we must singlehandedly save the world, or bring maximum happiness to all persons understood as a giant collective, it nevertheless always demands that we do more than we have up until now for those concrete, particular others who need our attention. This means in practice that we never meet this demand, we are always guilty. We cannot satisfy or discharge the requirement to love others by following any simple formula, like respecting other’s rights, or by performing any simple list of tasks, like providing for our dependents, giving 10% to charities, etc. If we truly love our neighbors, the burning need to do more is always there. I argued that this does not make us a slave to others, because it is not incompatible with having our own life, or forming commitments to various goals and values that don’t have directly to do with benefitting other persons just as persons. For example, we may have commitments to our own families, to our careers, to the pursuit of some
kind of artistic excellence, or to the acquisition of some sort of knowledge through research etc. When strangers are in great or terrible need, we may have to put these other projects and involvements on hold to render aid, but we do not in general have to give them all up in order to devote all our time to the poor or the needy, or just to love in abstract. This is an incorrect understanding of agape, one that is incompatible with developing all the goods we ought to care about in a meaningful life.

**Agape as Higher-Order Principle.** Instead, what agape as I would interpret it requires is that throughout all these more particular projects and involvements --in our family life, our jobs, sports and recreation, our civic activities, every major sphere in which we develop cares and concerns that give meaning to life-- we remain constantly attentive to the needs of other persons, and value their well-being and development as moral agents just because they are persons. Agape is thus a kind of attitude that pervades and colors all our significant activities, whatever they may be, with a real presence to others. What generous attentiveness requires will vary, of course, in different situations.

-- In many instances, it may mean noticing when someone is being ignored or marginalized, and trying to listen to them and bring them back into fruitful relationships with others.

-- In other cases, it may require us to alter our priorities, so that we can give special attention to some need that has arisen, for example with a sick relative, an injured neighbor, or crisis in our town.

-- In more extreme situations, like that in which Schindler found himself, it may require giving up virtually everything else to rescue all we can from destruction. It may even require risking death to aid others or resist injustice.

In short, what neighbor-love demands of us always depends on our particular circumstances: where and when we are, what opportunities we see open to us, what our personal projects and commitments are, what activities we are involved in, who crosses our path, what our talents are, and so on. It is from these perspectives that we perceive real opportunities to do good, to which a generous will for the good of others will enable us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly. (The example of the guy who answered tens of thousands of letters to Santa over several decades).

On this interpretation, then, agape is what philosophers in their technical lingo would call a higher-order value. The goal of pursuing others’s good for its own sake is general, and thus what agape requires is that we see all the more particular goals we pursue in the light of this ultimate goal, or that in pursuing other more particular goods of family, career, friendships, art, politics, etc. we condition and shape these pursuits with the ideal of neighbor-love in mind. This means not only that we are willing to alter or even set aside these pursuits when caring for our neighbors absolutely requires it, but also that we express our love for neighbors through and in the process of these other pursuits.

This makes sense of why agape as our ultimate value is not by itself enough to tell us what we should do with our time. Suppose God miraculously inserted us as a full-grown adult into the world, with no parents or history, just to be a do-gooder. We found ourselves suddenly on main street with just one thought: “I must do nothing but love others as generously as I can.” Starting from just that imperative, we would not have any principled way to decide exactly what to do, or how we might best love others. At the very least, we’d have to live for awhile, learn what is
going on, and become involved in different activities, in order to have the knowledge and opportunities to give others care, help, and attention they need and deserve. The ideal of loving others as neighbors makes sense only as a call to particular individuals to express generous regard as best they can within their unique the life-stories.

Third Talk: Duties to Future Generations (January 20, 2002).

Last time I argued against a certain understanding of independence and self-reliance that runs deep in American culture. I proposed instead that we always have to define our identities –our sense of what we stand for– relative to the past, including both our own personal history and the longer heritage of our culture. This is true even when we reject elements of the traditions and values of our predecessors in favor of better ways that more closely match transcendent ethical ideals. Moreover, I suggested that how neighbor-love can best be expressed in our actions depends on this historical context, and thus we should think of agape not as a separate task distinct from our other activities, but rather as a spirit of generosity and unselfish responsiveness that can enter into and enrich almost all our personal pursuits and modes of interaction with others through which our own unique narrative or story develops its meaning.

I. Agape Includes Institutional Justice

However, in suggesting that the precise way we should love others is relative to the unique historical individual who is to do the loving, I do not, mean to imply that neighbor-love is simply a matter of responding without forethought to strangers who cross our path by chance in life. Yet this idea has become fairly popular today, and many people seem to think that agape consists primarily in momentary and spontaneous fits of generosity, or “random acts of kindness” coming from nowhere and going to nowhere. Perhaps this one-sided view arises from a misunderstanding of Jesus’s famous parable of the good Samaritan who delays his journey to help a stranger injured by robbers and left lying on the side of the road. The good Samaritan, as you know, not only binds up the stranger’s wounds, but takes him to an inn and pays the innkeeper to tend him, and returns later to check on his progress. This is an act of totally unselfish love for a person who is quite unknown to him, with no expectation of return. And since agape is universal love for everyone, it includes the stranger, the person with whom we have no familial or historical connection beyond our shared human destiny. But Jesus did not mean that this is the only, or even the primary kind of context in which agapeistic love should reveal itself. If the Samaritan is wholeheartedly moved by pity for the victim’s suffering and concern for him just because he is a person, then such a Samaritan would surely also show concern for his employees or co-workers, really listen to and be involved with his children, love his spouse with sustained devotion over the years, care for the community in which he lives, not ignore the poor in his own town or village, and be outraged by particular acts of cruelty as well as systematic injustices (including –and Jesus’s audience knew very well that he meant this– bigotries and biases against other ethnic groups, like Samaritans!).
So agape includes a lot more than random acts of kindness. Although this isn’t sufficiently appreciated, agape can pervade and be expressed in other kinds of love that are practiced over long periods of time, and sustained by continued effort. For example, the love of a parent for a child, or a teacher’s attempt to help a struggling student understand hard concepts, or a counselor’s willingness to meet again and again with an extremely annoying client and really be present to that person with an open heart and their best wisdom, despite the difficulty of putting up with them. And for example, in supporting human rights and decent treatment for persons in other countries whom we shall never meet, at least in our lifetimes.

Thus agape includes an abiding concern for institutional justice. And since agape is universal love, this dimension of agape must mean that concern for institutional justice ultimately extends to the global scale (and even beyond that, if we ever discover other non-human persons from other planets, for example). Perhaps we can leave interplanetary justice alone for now, but the struggle for justice on Earth in the present, and for the future of this planet, will be my central theme for the remainder of these talks. This dimension of agape has been underemphasized in mainstream 20th-century theology. For example, it is missing from the powerful pictures of our responsibility to love our neighbors developed by two 20th century Jewish philosophers, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas (whose works are otherwise highly insightful and worth reading).

In his famous little book, I and Thou, as well as in less-well-known books like Between Man and Man, Buber developed a picture of agape as the mutual presence of one self to another, as if two souls could directly touch. Agape on this view requires above all else that we give our complete self to the other, cherishing them for their otherness and difference from us, and enjoying their reciprocal regard for its own sake. In his book, Totality and Infinity, Levinas developed a similar picture but without the reciprocity in Buber’s I-Thou encounters. For Levinas, the duty to love our neighbors is revealed in the dignity of the other person’s face. Their “Face” in Levinas’s special sense is not simply their physical face, but their presence as a person for whom we are already responsible without our choosing to be, a presence that we can never grasp or comprehend in neutral or detached understanding, or reduce to any non-moral terms.

These are very powerful pictures, and they have rightly inspired lots of people writing in philosophy today. But they leave out the historical dimension of our sense of responsibility, and as a result they are insufficiently attentive to the fact that in some cases we can also love others as our neighbors without directly encountering them in the flesh, or face-to-face, as Levinas puts it. We can love many people who we’ll never meet by caring deeply about, and devoting ourselves to, developing just institutions that secure human rights and flourishing social life for all persons. Buber and Levinas give the misimpression that agape is practiced only in private relationships, not in shaping the kinds of public institutions that define a democratic politics.

It is this error which also leads to the common view today that we measure whether a nation is loving not by looking at what its people is willing to sacrifice to achieve justice, but by asking whether lots of individuals practice kindness in their private relationships, and help the needy of their local areas by living time and money. As George Bush senior put it, in a good society there are a “thousand little points of light” out there (and it doesn’t matter how badly the poor suffer of how much the wealth gap grows). The implication is that individual acts of charity are supposed
to replace any serious social safety net or welfare state. The American Catholic bishops knew better when they argued for their preferential option for the poor as a truer expression of neighbor-love. Abraham Lincoln, founder of the Republican party, knew better when, as a state senator, he argued that needed increases in government revenue should be raised primarily from the “wealthy few” rather than the “many poor,” and that this would be intrinsically “right” and “equitable” (Letter to William Wait, March 2, 1839; *Lincoln on Democracy*, ed. Cuomo and Holzer, pp.24-25).

The thousand-points-of-light view, with its privatization of agape, goes along with a libertarian politics of minimal government spending on the collective good. Libertarianism, the political philosophy espoused by Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and other Chicago School economists as well as many contemporary pundits, has become very popular in our society today. As the official doctrine of the Heritage Foundation, which is the ideological center of the Republican party as it is today (so different than it was in Lincoln’s time), I would suggest that the libertarian conception of justice has even become the dominant view in the United States today. It holds that in principle, beyond a minimal duty not to initiate some bodily harm to others and not to steal their property, we have no responsibilities to others except those we voluntarily undertake (by act, promise, contract, etc). Others are moral strangers -- we are not our brother’s keeper. We only have to leave others alone to give them their full due.

If we follow the ideal of agape, then we must completely reject this libertarian dogma, and condemn it for the moral cancer that it is. I hope this is clear from what I have already said, but I will explain this in more depth below. Other moral perspectives which also reject libertarianism may detach their ideal of social justice from agape, and treat its formal requirements as the ultimate principle of morality. The agape approach instead places neighbor-love above all formal standards of justice, retaining the paradox that our mercy matters as much as our rigor, our going the extra mile matters as much as our recognizing individual rights. But neighbor-love ethics does not thereby suggest that social justice is unimportant or a mere adjunct to agape expressed in private relationships. We display agape just as forcefully in our public relationships when our concern for political justice is motivated by agapeistic regard for others as persons. To demand justice, and pit all our strength against agents who would deny or deprive it, is rather the central expression of neighbor-love.

**II. Justice as our most fundamental debt to the whole of human history.**

Moreover, when this is understood, the historical conception of agape I’ve sketched in these talks actually provides a better basis for understanding the requirements of social justice than other more standard accounts given by leading philosophers today. This is because when we consider our inherited historical responsibilities in their widest scope, we realize that ultimately we have to include the entire development of human culture as an accumulated endowment that makes life better for us now in a thousand ways than it was for people a hundred, a thousand, or ten-thousand years ago. In this respect, our situation would be analogous to a college student who gets a hundred times better education than her great-grandmother and who has to pay only one half of the cost because the school pays 50% out of annual interest from the endowment it has built from years of alumni giving. Think about how this works in relation to our colleges and
universities. Most students who attend schools with some history and significant endowment eventually realize that they have benefitted to an unquantifiable extent from the gifts that helped to build up the institution to its present status when they entered it; thus after graduating, most of them also feel at least some historical responsibility to “give back” by making their alma mater better for future generations. When they have the means, they feel some duty to leave their school better than they found it. And this logic has proven to be a very powerful force for building the best system of higher education in the entire world, a jewel that would have made Socrates and Plato proud.

Why do we all not feel the same way, on a much larger scale, toward the whole institution of human culture itself? Only because our dependence on this collective endowment is so pervasive and all-encompassing that we take it totally for granted, and barely notice it unless it somehow is brought into focus for us. What does this most general of all collective endowments primarily consist in? As I suggested last time, the best way to think of it isn’t in terms of the specific scientific knowledge acquired, the technologies invented, the infrastructure built up, the genres of fine art and literature that have been created, the philosophical archives or the accumulated historical experience and wisdom of the ages, or even particular political traditions that have arisen since human beings first began to settle in permanent agricultural communities. In and through all these achievements (along with some setbacks), there is the fundamental fact that since the dawn of history, the extent to which the happiness and well-being of human individuals depends on mere chances of fortune, or contingencies of fate, has generally declined. This general trend is of course only an average, and today across the globe, some people live lives that are far less secure, far more exposed to the forces of luck and natural selection, than we are. But on the whole, since our ancestors first began to clear the land of wild beasts and forests and build our society, the trend has been towards less and less exposure to the threats of raw nature. This is the very essence of culture, of human history. Indeed the human race has done this job so well that we now face a problem inconceivable to our ancestors: namely, to preserve remaining wilderness areas and natural ecosystems from further colonization by human culture. The natural environment itself has ceased to be the enemy that we must fight to make the crops grow, and become instead something we can choose to preserve or not, something we must now consider part of the growing endowment we will pass on future generations. Rather than extending the historical trend by cutting down more forests, we must look to deepen the gains made by resisting the most problematic source of natural insecurity that remains: namely, chance of birth. Plato, in proposing his meritocracy as a replacement for caste systems, was the first (in western culture) to try to reduce the extent to which the life-expectations of human beings depended on what family they were born to. And in our nation today, chance of birth determines our fate less completely than it did in Plato’s time. But we all know very well how far we are from achieving a society in which no child is born into dire poverty that threatens their health, security, and happiness, or forced to grow up in a hostile environment surrounded by dilapidated ugliness that crushes the spirit and lowers their chance of developing their full human potential.

To sum up, then, the most fundamental blessing which the past has conferred on each of us at birth is the progress so far made towards justice, understood in this positive sense as a situation in which life-opportunities depend as little as possible on chance of birth. Having benefitted from this primary endowment, we must seek to enlarge it by further progress towards this ideal.
Thus if loving others now and in the future means responding to properly to the past, it means in particular striving to make conditions better for those who would otherwise suffer unduly due to misfortune. Beyond trying to prevent human-created atrocities, we must also work to make sure that every child has an equal chance from birth. This is in truth the very core of neighbor-love. And since, of course, those who exist in the present are already benefitting from past progress made towards this ideal, and already suffering from past failures to make better and swifter progress in this direction, this is primarily a duty towards the future, to see that children not yet born suffer less than children today from relative disadvantages arising simply from the natural lottery. For today, far too many children still derive their most important advantages or disadvantages from the natural lottery, which places them in better or worse off starting positions in a highly unequal society.

And this is clearly the polar opposite of the libertarian political ideology which holds that we have no duty to promote social justice in the positive sense I’ve defined. Ayn Rand said that no amount of inequality which results from the natural lottery is unjust, but she could utter such an abomination only because she had wholly overlooked the incalculable extent to which she, like every other human being, had benefitted from the entire cumulative development of human culture towards freeing our happiness from brute chance and contingency. But she was correct at least in titling hers the philosophy of selfishness. The opposite understanding of social justice is, by contrast, the philosophy of neighbor-love.

III. Conclusion

So far I’ve rejected several pieces of conventional wisdom about agape: namely, that neighbor-love is a timeless norm or law with no historical variance, that we express agape primarily in our private relationships quite apart from institutional concerns, and finally that we owe neighbor-love mainly to persons in need in the present. Instead I’ve suggested that the core of agape is a duty to work for progress towards greater institutional justice in the future, and that this duty emerges from our debt to human culture as a whole. If this is at all convincing, then we need next to ask what the major challenges and prospects are for the future of the human race. In considering this, I think we must accept that given the rate of technological and economic change alone, it is hard to project or foresee anything clearly beyond, say, 100 or 150 years hence. But several fundamentals of life hang in the balance in this period --for the natural environment, for the basic genetic makeup of future generations, and the ultimate confrontation between democratic rights and dictatorship are all upon us before we are really ready for them. Our collective answers to problems of these kinds will determine whether our great-grandchildren look back to us with thankfulness and respect for the tests we passed through, or with regret and sorrow for the horrors we failed to prevent when we had the chance. I will take up a discussion of some of these amazing and harrowing challenges in the next talk.

Fourth Talk: Global Justice (January 27, 2002).

I have argued that neighbor-love is an attitude of responsibility both to persons in the present,
and to the future of society as a whole, informed and conditioned by our past. What are some of the main challenges in the next hundred years, and how should a person following the ideal of neighbor-love try to meet them? I will focus on three kinds of problems: those deriving from biological science, those concerning our natural environment, and those requiring fundamental changes in the structure of global politics.

I. Environmental and Technological Problems

1. It seems clear that what happens to the natural environment on earth in the next hundred years will have irreversible implications for the entire remaining future of the human race. We have become conscious of the dramatic affect of human economies, including especially our use of fossil fuels, only at the point where it is already almost too late to save enough of the key wilderness areas needed to sustain a viable global ecosystem. In the development of this realization, in the last thirty years, there has been an interesting and important shift in the kind of issues on which environmental ethicists focus. Two-to-three decades ago, the primary emphasis was on dangers that different types of pollution may pose in particular regions, the safety of nuclear power and what to do with waste from nuclear plants, the safety of drinking water, the fear of running out of oil, the need to preserve particularly prized animal species from extinction, and the problem of preserving sufficient “green spaces” for aesthetic and recreational value in areas of high population growth and suburban sprawl. Now the central problems are much bigger in scope and much longer-term in potential impact. In fact, they are global problems on which the whole earth now seems to teeter on the brink of irreversible disasters.

A. First and foremost, if the growth of the human population doesn’t level off before we reach 10 billion, and if we don’t find other ways to generate the enormous increases in energy that will attend economic development in underdeveloped regions of the world, then we will exceed the “carrying capacity” of the earth. We will not be to provide enough fuel for an advanced technological society to run, and even worse, we may not be able to provide enough food for everyone. Overextraction of fresh water and overfarming could result in an expansion of deserts and drop in world food production. The combined result could be a massive retraction in the world economy at some point fifty to one hundred years from now, with a resulting wave of billions of deaths. The effect would be much like the Bubonic Plague on medieval Europe.

B. Second, we face the possibility that in fifty years, all the earth’s remaining rainforests will be virtually gone and with them, most of the world’s species and biodiversity will be irrevocably lost. This part of our shared endowment will be lost forever because of the heedless quest for short-term gain.

C. Third, we face the reality that shrinking forests and increasing carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels as our primary energy source is leading to global warming, with a likely increase of 3 degrees F in world averages even if we did everything feasible now to stop worsening the problem. The north polar ice cap has already lost 40% of its thickness. The result may be the loss of most present seacoasts, with devastating impact on these environments and on present-day port cities. Other possible effects on global weather patterns
are harder to predict. If large portions of the southern polar ice cap were to slide into the sea, the result could be massive tsunamis destroying coastal regions in a matter of minutes.

These problems are profoundly disturbing, but the worst part of it is that dealing with them really requires a global response which our political institutions have not yet evolved to deliver. The environmental toll of economic and technological development has reached crisis point before our political structures have developed sufficiently to be able to respond as needed.

2. Our prospect of a positive solution may actually be better on the second major challenge for the future that I’ll mention today, which is the challenge of ensuring that our new genetic sciences benefit the human race rather than facilitating new injustices. In the next fifty years, unless legislation prevents it, we can expect to see the widespread use of gene therapies to enhance human capacities beyond their normal range, and to select parent-preferred features for children from among those that would be considered normal. It is these uses of the new technologies that will prove most problematic, rather than, for example, the use of gene therapies or even embryo selection to avoid inheritable genetic diseases or to restore normal human functioning. These ameliorative or restorative applications may have the result of improving health and functioning for those families that have access to them, while the other applications will have the result of creating designer offspring or superhuman beings. These problems stem from new forms of genetic engineering and embryo selection that allow us to pick and choose among normal traits, as well as to enhance our biological capacities beyond their evolved normal range. Aside from making children feel tailor-made to their parents’ specifications, these developments may enhance socioeconomic inequality far beyond its present levels (as films like Gattaca aptly suggest). But these are not the only problems raised by new forms of technology. Others that receive much less press are equally threatening:

A. In addition to genetic enhancements that raise human functions beyond their normal capacities or select for parent-preferred optional features, we can expect nanotechnology --or micro-size robotic agents-- to provide us not only with ways to miniturize and automate various production processes, but also to make possible the enhancement of various human functions via micro-implants. These will have wonderful therapeutic uses but also more disturbing possible uses:
   -- implants in the eyes and ears to enhance vision or hearing,
   -- implanted weapons to elude conventional detectors
   -- implants to enhance muscular function, and perhaps sexual function.
In short, the results of nanotechnology may be much the same as enhancitory genetic engineering or selective eugensics.

B. Closely related to this, with developments in neuroscience I doubt we will solve the riddle of why electric fields in complex net-like biological systems generate sentience, but we will have the ability to tap directly into our brains in all sorts of worrying ways ripe for abuse. The movie Strange Days anticipates some of these developments, as Gattaca does with the social results of enhancitory and optional-selection genetic engineering. For example,
   -- implants that record and monitor people’s thoughts, e.g. telling us how often a convict has thoughts of committing crimes again.
implants that directly stimulate certain parts of the brain. If you think heroin is addictive, wait until we have devices that can directly stimulate pleasure centers and produce a cascading endorphin rushes. If you think torture has been performed by every ghoulish method imaginable, wait until we can directly stimulate pain centers in the brain and artificially produce various agonizing sensations. If you think slavery has been bad in the past, wait until people can implant such devices in their slaves to control them.

perhaps it will even become possible to change or control a person’s thoughts by directly altering their neurons, thus enabling pure forms of thought control never before imagined.

more likely, it will be possible to directly connect people’s minds by artificial links, thus allowing them to experience each other’s thoughts as their own. While this might make possible forms of communion purer than any previously possible, it will also become the ultimate truth serum.

finally, we will be able to link certain parts of the human brain with computers or other artificial information storage and processing devices. The result of this will be exactly like enhancing the potency of the brain via genetic engineering, only easier: it will vastly expand the limits of our memory and our cognitive powers. Someone wanting to recall a fact will literally be able to tap into the encyclopedia stored on a chip in their brain, or to send complex math problems into a separate processor which will report back the answer to consciousness. This kind of technology could be used to restore normal functioning when lost, but more likely it will be used by those with money and power to increase their capacities and solidify their domination of those without access to such cybernetic enhancements.

II. The Challenge of Global Coordination

These plausible examples, along with genetic engineering, pose three basic challenges for the middle-term future of the human race as it seeks to build a world of greater justice for all, rather than morphing into an evil empire of super-enhanced elites and morlockian underclasses. These challenges have the following implications:

--First, only a moral code which measure the rightness and wrongness of actions and policies by absolute standards of decency, placing some things off limits whatever their beneficial consequences might be, can save us from the cumulative result of allowing all these uses of new technologies whenever we think the costs are outweighed by the benefits. Consequentialist moral reasoning will lead inevitably to a world in which many human beings have so altered their basic capacities that love of one’s neighbors may mean nothing in such a world.

--Second, we do not have much time left in which the human race will still be able to reject the increasingly dominant libertarian ideology of maximally open markets no matter what the result on socioeconomic inequality. For if this ideology rules citizen thinking and government policies in the most technologically advanced western-style democracies on the planet, the majority of citizens and their governments will decide that they should leave it up to individual decision -- and thus to the open market-- whether people want to use these new technologies. By supporting the myth that these should be questions merely of private conscience, and thus establishing an ideological belief that the problem is solved by giving everyone the same negative liberty to use
these technologies however they like if they can pay for it, the libertarians will make sure that at least two or three generations of the wealthiest individuals can enhance their capacities and compound these advantages over time. By the time the error is clear to the remaining underclass, they will find it virtually impossible to resist the dominant elite. Expanding inequality in life-opportunity --the very opposite of justice-- will have become a permanent and virtually ineradicable feature of the foreseeable future in human history.

--Third, we have equally little time remaining to realize a genuine enlightened world order --or at least a developing trend in the geopolitical situation-- towards the establishment of democracies and basic human rights in every nation on earth. If the technological situation I have predicted arrives while large parts of the world, including advanced industrial powers, remain in the grip of tyrants or military dictators, of tribal oligarchies or fascist nationalists, or ingrown and kleptocratic one-party rulers, these this kind of regime will be able to use these new technologies to solidify their hegemony in their nations and threaten the democratic world with a new kind of arms race. We would have to engage in enhancitary genetic engineering and cybernetic implants to keep up with them, or risk letting them expand their spheres of influence over more and more of the globe. In order not to be in this dilemma, we have to rid the world of such regimes before these technological possibilities are realities and widely available.

III. The Two Main Geopolitical Obstacles to World Democracy

If I seem to have entered into the realm of strategic realpolitik, it is only to show that we generally lack an appropriate sense of urgency about solving the fundamental structural problems of the world political system we have inherited from the 19th century, divided as it is into largely self-interested and competitive nation states, among which the established democracies have only an ambivalent commitment to social justice, which itself is fading as the cancer of libertarianism eats away our traditional agapeistic understanding of justice. This highly vulnerable system, capped by a Security Council that represents only national governments since it is not elected by their peoples directly, and whose actions require unanimity among the permanent members, and whose permanent and rotating members include dictatorships, is utterly unequipped to solve problems of an essentially global nature concerning all humanity, which we are certain to face this century. The only institution capable of making and enforcing the policies that could solve such problems would be a democratic world government, or, on the way to that, at least a federation of existing democracies formed while they still have the advantage and together would hold the upper hand in the world, if they were truly united and could act as one for the common good of the whole world, even when the decision imposes unpleasant costs on individual nation-states (just as the government of the United States is supposed primarily to consider our national good, not the good of each state considered separately).

Democracy today faces two primary enemies, each much more dangerous and harder to uproot than the half-imagined threat of communism. First, there is soft despotism, the model we see in China, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and several other southeast Asian nations. The soft-despotist doctrine says that if there is sufficient economic progress and wealth through the creation of functioning capitalist markets, the people will be placated and satisfied even if there is vast socioeconomic inequality and only the dictators (along perhaps with the economic elite)
have any political power. In other words, it is the thesis that capitalism does not require
democracy, and an oligarchy or military dictatorship can continue to rule while economic
development advances and the benefits trickle down to the underclass.

-- Now this model poses a great threat because its primary thesis is probably true, pace the
libertarian myth that capitalism and democracy are essentially connected. In fact, this soft
despotist thesis is only the flip side of the socialist realization that democracy does not require
unlimited capitalism either. Both democracy without runaway robber-baron capitalism and
such capitalism without democracy are possible. Promoting the expansion of democracy
around the world requires, as Lincoln saw, showing that democracy is an essential part of
political justice and valuable for its own sake, not merely as an adjunct to capitalism.

– Blinded by the libertarian ideology, the government of the United States, and thus the world’s
democratic nations in general, are doing practically nothing to resist the growth and expansion
of the soft despotist model. Gullibly believing that opening up their markets to further
capitalist grown will some how magically bring about a turn to democracy, our government
has for decades now been playing right into the hands of the soft despotist leaders.

– If this model expands to embrace more developing nations, and at the same time developed
western-style democracies, poisoned by the lies of libertarianism, become more and more
oligarchical as their internal socioeconomic inequality increases, by the year 2100 soft
despotism could easily be the model for the whole world. Then humanity’s future will be
dark indeed. Our decedents may subsist ever after that in a world empire of genetically and
cybernetically enhanced elites holding all important economic and political power, and easily
controlling a pacified and morally blinded mass of billions of human beings so degraded that
they cannot even perceive their plight, beings for whom the pleasures offered by new
technologies provide a sufficient opiate. Not a pleasant thought, but Phillip Dick already
foresaw it in his novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which became the movie
*Blade Runner*.

Second, there is the threat posed by the expansion of religious fundamentalism and the
conversion of both old oligarchies and young democracies into ultraconservative theocracies.
Although this raises complex sociological question, the process I speak of here is too obvious
now to need much explanation. I do not limit this to Islamic fundamentalism, however. I see a
similar danger in the theocratic pretensions of the *Likud* party in Israel, as well as in the
‘Christian right’ in the United States (though that is to paint too many people with too broad a
brush). Something like a Hindu theocracy could also become a real possibility in India and other
Asian nations. In every case, the chief evil that results is a process that systematically
brainwashes its children and denies them every opportunity of a liberal and critical education,
depriving them of the chance to become agents of neighbor-love, and degrading them into
weapons to be used as a means to political ends. And quite aside from danger of harm we face
from such fanatics, this is a great and terrible evil for these children themselves --one which we
cannot ignore or underemphasize out of our desire to be fair to Islamic peoples and not to rush to
judgment in the wake of September 11, though anti-Islamic bigotry is now a real danger for us.

The hard question is what kind of response this threat demands. In the case of soft despotism,
the only possible response is clear: to form a world union of democracies to pressure soft-
despotist regimes to reform and grant their people full democratic rights. Beyond our short-term tactics to reduce the immediate threat of terrorist who might easily come to possess nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, we have to think in the long-term about the causes of such fundamentalist theocracies. Here again I think the lesson of political science is clear enough: these regimes arise primarily in reaction to the growth of soft despotism in their own nation, especially when the former soft despotist regimes is seen as allied with, or as an agent of, western democracies. In other words, the potential theocrats see western democracies themselves as agents of soft despotism, whose ultimate goal is world hegemony through elitist control of the world capitalist system. The primary motives for fanatical fundamentalist movements is not religious, but political: it is a distorted form of a resistance movement, which aims to replace economic and military dictators with the rule of the Imam or divinely ordained prophet.

If this analysis is right, then the best long-term strategy against fundamentalist theocracies will be for western-style democracies to take a clear stand against all forms of despotism, both hard and soft, and to support social justice for the masses in these nations against their own elitist rulers (rather than, for example, continuing our misguided support for the corrupt Saudi royalty). When a world league of democratic nations stands firmly for the expansion of democracy, human rights, and decent standards of living for everyone, even at their own economic cost, we can be sure that religious moderates will appeal to people far more than ultraconservative extremists in nations actually or potentially run by theocracies today. Just imagine, for example, that such a world league (not the US alone) had overthrown Saddam Hussein, replaced his regime of terror with a democracy, and provided substantial aid to rebuild the Iraqi economy, bringing peace and prosperity to its people. How likely would they be to put in power an anti-Western fanatical theocrat who would begin indoctrinating the Iraqi children to become suicide bombers? Whereas now, if Hussein falls, the result will probably be another such theocracy. The same is might be true if the Saudi royal family or the flawed Egyptian democracy were to be overthrown by an internal rebellion. How much control would then pass to fundamentalist parties?

These findings confirm the age-old wisdom that the only way to safety and prosperity at home is holding firm to the basic principles of social justice in determining our foreign policy. We have not done that, and we are paying a high price for it. The potential price in the future, however, could be orders of magnitude greater. At stake is the ultimate hope of the human race of a world with liberty and justice for all.

IV. Conclusion: World Government? A Federation of Democracies as Alternative
For better or worse, my analysis implies that this hope probably stands or falls forever on what Americans and a few of our key allies decide in the next few decades. I know this sounds suspiciously like manifest destiny, but in all seriousness, this country now, with its potential for a truly just multicultural democracy, is the microcosm of the ‘world to come’ on earth. We may have thought that our contribution to the hope of humanity was done with the defeat of Hitler, but that was only a warm-up. The really decisive battles lay before today’s generations.

And yet, for all the dark portents I’ve given, we can do what is needed. If we can remember the heroism of past generations, which allowed us to purge some of the worst evils from our own
system and oppose similar evils abroad, then we can indeed meet the test this century. Remembering the best of our ancestors, “the wisdom and strength they inspired will come to our aid,” and we will know what must be done.

In the end, only two things—two little things!—may suffice. First, we have to remember who we are, and what we owe to the past, so that we can rid our national consciousness of the libertarian worm that is eating out the heart of our moral spirit, preventing good and loving individuals from properly conceiving or caring about institutional justice and socioeconomic equality at home. This shouldn’t be hard, if our philosophers, theologians, and politicians would wake up and realize that Ayn Rand is the main enemy of neighbor-love in the United States today, and begin to fight her in earnest. That’s the easy part.

Second, the hard part. To form the global league of democracies that can meet the challenges before us, we have to make a decisive break with the doctrines of the past, and reject the principle of the absolute sovereignty of individual nations, upon which the world system today is still founded. We have to accept that the US will only be one member, equal with others, in this league, and accept its sovereignty even though its directly elected leadership may not always choose policies that favor our nation with respect to other members. In other words, to make such a world federation of democracies work, we will have to humble ourselves. Then the union, and not we, will be the ‘policeman of the world.’

What will this body do if it is rightly conceived and founded?
(A) It will make and enforce environmental policy for the world, imposing on every developed nation the costs necessary to preserve the natural endowment for future generations, and compensating developing nations for the sacrifices they must make in this process too.
(B) It will regulate and manage the world economic system in a way that facilitates smooth development and prevents robber-baron capitalism, national tax havens, and the ruthless exploitation of the third world by the first.
(C) In accordance with the agapeistic ideal, it will define and enforce fundamental standards of human rights, resisting and isolating the remaining despotist regimes on earth, and directly overthrowing the most egregious of these where possible. It will intervene, by force when necessary, to prevent genocides and wars of aggression, and facilitate the flowering of understanding between peoples of different races and religions. It will welcome and aid new members as old soft despotist regimes and fundamentalist theocracies cave in before this inexorable force of justice, and become new democracies.
(D) In order to prevent runaway socioeconomic inequality, it will set some reasonable limits on the use of genetic engineering and cybernetic technology to enhance human capacities beyond their normal (biologically evolved) range.

There in short is my dream for my great-grandchildren and all the human beings with whom they will share the earth in mutual love. It does not seem impossible or utopian to me. Rather, in my view, settling for anything less would be a betrayal of our most basic responsibility to the future, and a violation of that duty that makes us persons: to love others, now and in the future, as we are loved now and have been loved in the past.
Thank you again for this opportunity.