

“Looking the Other in the Eye” As a Guide for Policymaking

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Abstract

“Looking the other in the eye” is a figure of speech that has a moral significance beyond its literary service. However, to be extended to public policy, i.e., beyond the face-to-face interactions of tightly-knit communities, it must be applied to interactions mediated by institutions and cultural patterns. This can be done through a careful reformulation of what the figure of speech means. Use of this figure of speech in guiding policymaking is illustrated by applying it to two issues -- homelessness and the setting of highway speed limits -- to show how it can guide public consideration of complex issues and can even clarify the discussion of some.

“Looking the Other in the Eye” As a Guide for Policymaking

This work suggests that interpersonal morality and, more broadly, public policy aim to enable us to “look the other in the eye” [LTOITE] in dealing with one another. While not proposing an intuitionist morality per se, because it does not assert the primacy of moral intuitions in analyzing public issues, this work does assert that these intuitions, revealed as one tries to LTOITE, are at least one means of analysis. In many cases, as the various examples herein show, LTOITE can produce fresh insights into and even clarification of public issues.

The first section of this work discusses the LTOITE figure of speech itself and its use as a moral guide in face-to-face relationships. The second section reformulates and evaluates the figure of speech as a moral guide for system-mediated relationships, i.e., for public policy. The third and fourth sections apply the figure of speech to two specific policy problems: homelessness and the setting of highway speed limits. The final section lays out how patterns of social power affect policymaking based on the LTOITE perspective.

LTOITE as a Guide to Interpersonal Morality

In this first, long section we examine what LTOITE has to do with morality at all. The first subsection sets forth a number of examples intended to show that LTOITE has some actual authority -- that it is not solely and merely a figure of speech. The next two subsections look in more detail at the dynamics of LTOITE and in particular how it gains this authority. The final subsection addresses a number of the objections that naturally arise against transforming this mild process from a figure of speech into a general moral guide.

LTOITE Is More Than a Figure of Speech

In the early mornings here, the water is never more than a degree or two above freezing. [Dr.] John Liam's been doing this work [freeing whales tangled in fishermen's nets] for many hundreds of whales, but there's a price -- he gets severe sinus pains from the constant immersion of his head so he can see how to plan his next move. Yet John Liam has learned that if he can only achieve eye contact with a trapped whale, there will often be a change in the whale's attitude from fear to relaxation and sometimes even cooperation.

-- Payne (1992:@59 minutes)

The act of looking someone in the eye is more than a figure of speech. It is a real, physical manifestation of a reliable (or at least significant) moral guide. In ordinary language, "looking the other in the eye" means to have an honest relationship with the other, at least honest on one's own part: to have good intentions, to act in a way one believes is fair, to act in a way one reasonably believes the other agrees with or at least can agree with after suitable explanation and thought. Conversely, "being unable to look someone in the eye" is a standard figure of speech representing guilt or shame -- an inability either to defend what one has done or to be proud of who one is. The image even extends to one's own internal authenticity when we speak of "being able to look at oneself in the mirror," the image in the glass representing all the other voices whose agreement one has not sought. Certainly I can testify to the reality of these things. When dealing with someone wrongly, at least in my own assessment, I find I cannot comfortably meet their eyes. If I do, I find myself defocusing -- either literally defocusing my eyes or else defocusing my attention, putting up a mental barrier of anger, or anxiety, or racing thoughts, and so on -- in short, closing myself off from any true connection with the other.¹

When I catch myself doing this, I am able to change the situation. For example, while refinancing my house a few years ago, I found myself in conflict with the lender's agent. The lender's forms confused me, and the agent could not explain them, nor was she authorized to continue if I altered them. (She was acting for a mortgage company located a thousand miles away.) After repeated conflicts over the language, I became aware that we were neither of us looking at the other, and with that awareness I was able to detach myself from my anger and feelings of victimization enough to review the situation. I asked myself, "What is it about this situation that leads me to be unable to look at her directly?" and the answer told me what I needed to say. Looking at the agent calmly, I told her that I was sorry for getting angry at her, that I had honest concerns about what I was signing, that I was unhappy with her inability to answer my questions, that I recognized her inability to change anything, and, finally, that since I had decided I was not going to walk away from the session, I would sign the papers without further fuss.² This enabled us to be able to look at each other again, and we concluded our business with more comfort, even if not a lot of friendliness. If we had had more time or faced the prospect of a longer relationship, we each might have said more, but given the circumstances, we did about as well as we could. In short, being able to look her in the eye was a good guide to establishing what felt like a moral relationship, not moral in some abstract, perfected sense, but as moral as possible given the situation.

The Practice of LTOITE

The above discussion and example asserts that LTOITE is a reliable moral guide, but more remains to be said to clarify its nature and to respond to some potential criticisms of it. Note that we are considering here only face-to-face, interpersonal morality; considerations surrounding

public policy appear later.

LTOITE is a simultaneous offering and opening of oneself to the other. The phrasing is important. First, we *offer* the other person our assumptions and judgments instead of insisting on them. This comes out of a consciousness and acceptance of our fallibility. Some people might confuse this with weakness, believing that any admission of uncertainty permits and even invites attempted domination in response. However, rationally recognizing our fallibility is different from abandoning our views. “Offering oneself” is not a hostile act, but it is an insistent one.

Dominating responses are refusals to recognize what we are offering, but we are perfectly entitled to offer ourselves as insistently as necessary. Even if such insistence is never acknowledged, we have not lost anything by the offering. (Fisher et al., 1991, discuss this problem at length, terming it “taming the hard bargainer.”)

Second, LTOITE also *opens* us to the other. If we have something to offer, regardless of our imperfection, then so does the other. Even if we disagree with the other, the other’s perspective may turn out to enlighten ours. We cannot dismiss the other in advance, because we are necessarily blind to our own imperfections (even while knowing they exist), and thus cannot know where the other may enlighten us.

This offering and opening of oneself can go on even though decisions may need to be made without consensus. In this incarnated, limited existence, we often lack the resources of time, money, attention, and so on that are necessary to yield a mutually agreed-upon decision ... and failure to decide may itself be a decision. But even if circumstances force us into an arbitrary, non-consensual decision, we can still LTOITE, each of us recognizing that the arbitrariness of the decision (and even, in retrospect, its irrationality or unfairness) comes from the imperfections of

this world, not from ill will or indifference to one another. We can continue the process of coming to understand each other even if we must decide things without full understanding.

Non-LTOITE Forms of Engagement

The above discusses what the attitude of LTOITE is; let us now contrast it with what it is not. LTOITE is not a dominating staring-down-of the other, nor an angry glaring-at the other, nor a dependent looking-for-direction-from the other, nor a passive acquiescence-to the other, nor an objectifying gaze at the other. These are forms of looking *at* the other's eyes, but they are not looking the other *in* the eye. In each of these at least one of the central elements of engagement -- offering and opening oneself -- is missing. Although one is in the presence of the other, one is not with the other. A dominating stare excludes the other, seeking only to impose one's will, recognizing the other at most as a problem to be overcome, not a source of information or a partner in discussion. An angry glare excludes all understanding of the other's perspective, seeing the situation only in terms of one's own thwarted desires. In an opposite way, dependently looking for direction from the other or passively acquiescing to the other also are not LTOITE, because they deny the possibility of one's own interests and contributions. So whether one is the active agent, as with domination and anger, or the passive agent, as with dependence and passivity, or no agent at all, as with objectification, the absence of mutual interaction means that while one's eyes may be physically directed at the other's, they penetrate no further than the surface.

Another form of false LTOITE is theorization, meaning the pretense of understanding others without actually looking them in the eye. The true LTOITE perspective is determinedly concrete. This goes back to the point made earlier that we can never be certain that we

comprehend any situation so fully that others cannot teach us something. Offering and opening oneself to others may not provide immediate, complete understanding, but theorization abandons the quest altogether, or at least outside the theory's self-defined parameters. This is not to say that we can do without theory, because we are constantly dealing with one another in terms of constructed, incomplete images of each other. All that is argued is that without some living connection with the other, we (and/or they) become victims of stale, rigid, monological conceptions.

Objections to LTOITE as a Guide

This subsection addresses four objections lodged against LTOITE's claimed moral usefulness. Each of them asserts that LTOITE is a weak guide: limited to a specific culture, limited to visual contact, powerless in practice, and vague.

1. LTOITE is culture-bound.

Is LTOITE only a culture-specific guide? It has been said that in some cultures -- African-American, Asian, and Native American cultures are among those mentioned -- it is insulting or at least disrespectful to look another in the eye. Even if this is true, however, the implied cultural relativism appears mistaken. To take the African-American case, it seems evident that wherever the practice originated, it was certainly required by the experience of slavery; a slave looking the master in the eye assumed an equality that slave-owners could not tolerate, because although they justified slavery to themselves, they had no justification for keeping slaves that required the slaves' agreement. The point is that the cultural variations in LTOITE can be seen as deriving from variations in different cultures' organization of dominance and submission. Where X is forbidden to look Y in the eye, we find Y dominating X.

Cultural prohibitions on eye contact serve a dual purpose. From X's point of view, they keep X from challenging Y. One cannot challenge a system without LTOITE. Cultural restrictions allow rebels to be identified and the conflict to be ideologically recast as a violation of cultural norms instead of the suppression of the exploited. The restrictions also serve a purpose for Y, in that Y is protected from having to face and justify the existing system. To return to the example of U.S. slavery, slave-owners had to have had difficulty in looking their slaves in the eye, for to do so in recognition of the slaves' humanity was to open the door to questions about the legitimacy of slavery itself. This is the psychological and emotional dynamic of *Huckleberry Finn*, as Huck learns to *see* Jim.

2. *LTOITE is a solely visual metaphor.*

Under Hoban's skeptical eye, Oliver sat his father in a chair across the fire from Yevgeny's and poured each a glass of *cuvée* Bethlehem from a flagon on the table. And though Yevgeny refused to acknowledge Tiger's presence, preferring to set his gaze firmly at the flames, some tacit complicity obliged them to take their first sip in unison and, by ignoring each other so intently, to accord each other mutual recognition.

-- LeCarré (1999:337)

Another objection is that because LTOITE has no meaning for blind people, it cannot be a universal guide. While this objection is true as far as it goes, LTOITE is most fundamentally about the offering and opening of oneself. Even if I were to blindfold myself in my interactions with others, I would still be aware internally of my authenticity in what I say and my receptiveness to what others say.³ So while this work argues for the reality and significance of LTOITE as a guide to morality, it does not claim that it is the only useful guide.

LTOITE is an expression of a psychological interpenetration of people that allows them to coordinate their behavior. To deal with another, one must introject the other, carrying on a discourse with the real other through the medium of this introjected image. LTOITE communicates expectation and connection: “I have proposed this, I believe you will agree (or at least that you can reasonably agree) to it, and I am eager to discover your response.” This ability makes people capable of moral thoughts and agreements at all. LTOITE, then, is universal, even if only in the qualified sense that every culture must have some equivalent in order to negotiate agreements.

3. Offering and opening oneself is impotent.

This work earlier mentioned the problem that offering oneself in recognition of one’s own fallibility invites dominance. The same problem applies even more to opening oneself to the other. The reply in both cases, as given earlier, is that one can offer and open oneself and still assert one’s claims. However, this is only a negative response. The problem remains whether LTOITE has any power when dealing with others. Why bother with it? Why not save time by jumping immediately to the inevitable battle of wills?

The most obvious answer is that sometimes LTOITE does work, and when it does, it produces agreements that are more reliable, that maintain the relationship among the parties, and that leave less money on the table, so to speak.⁴ Though we may be unable to achieve complete understanding of one another, even a partial understanding can bring these benefits. Furthermore, life is not a series of discrete, unrelated negotiations with strangers. Some people we will deal with again and again, and LTOITE improves understanding over time. Even during contact with strangers, there is an element of self-creation and self-education at work that carries beyond the

immediate interaction.

It may be useful to give some examples of the power of LTOITE. After first delivering the present argument in a conference paper (Chilton 2003), I began to employ its perspective more intentionally in dealing with others. One aspect of this was my use of LTOITE as a moral guide, where I found that my own greater clarity about a situation helped the other person deal with it better as well, as described above. In other words, my use of the LTOITE approach had an impact beyond myself; it transformed the relationship. But this transformation has also served to transform many other interactions. Here are two examples. Recently, a friend and I were catching up with each other over lunch. My friend was talking at length and in detail about things of little interest to me, and I was feeling tired and bored. It occurred to me that I was not looking him in the eye -- in the mistaken hope, I think, that my lack of response would bring an end to his monologue. I decided to experiment with looking him in the eye. I found that he had not been looking me in the eye, but as I did so, he began to flick his gaze up at me as if to make sure that I was indeed looking at him. After a minute or three of this, I found that our conversation became radically more interesting and enjoyable, more of a dialogue, and more real on both sides.

A second example: Several years back, recovering from some surgery in a hospital, I was idly walking its corridors when I heard a child crying. I found a large pediatric ward with a one- or two-year-old boy sitting in a crib and crying broken-heartedly. No one else was around -- no doctors, no nurses, no children in the other cribs, no visitors. Having been in that situation as a child, I walked in, looked him gently in the eye, and talked to him. "Yes, it's too bad. [Pause] You're all alone. [Pause] You must be bored and scared." And so on. At first the boy just continued to cry as if I was not there, but as I continued to engage him even in his crying, he

began to stop it and to look at me with a kind of wonder. Looking him in the eye, and talking to him in terms of that connection, had quickly and radically changed our connection. At which point, unfortunately, a nurse appeared and shooed me away.

These cases both show that LTOITE has great power to transform a relationship -- not the power of force, threats, or bribes, but the power to accomplish things that those other methods cannot. The reader can test this statement through h/her own experiments.

4. LTOITE provides only vague and subjective guidance.

Another objection to this figure of speech is that it is too vague and subjective to be a guide to the moral -- the philosophical equivalent of Jiminy Cricket's advice to Pinocchio to just "♪ let your conscience be your guide ♪♪." However, this work does not advance LTOITE as a definition of morality but rather as a shorthand for and standard of what definitions of morality are trying to accomplish. It is not a set of specific precepts or principles; rather, it is a guide to moral life, a reminder of how we would like to live. LTOITE's apparently informal characterization of morality rests on the innate (albeit often unrealized) capacity to understand each other, a capacity that has its fullest flowering in speech but that is present in animal brains as well. If we cannot look others in the eye as we deal with them, there is something wrong with the relationship. The exact nature of what is wrong may not be clear, but we can use our discomfort to identify the problem, address it, and hopefully resolve it.

This indication has the virtue of being independent of the rationalizations we use to excuse and disguise our actions and to deny discomfort with them. Granted, acknowledging discomfort does not tell us what to do. However, in some situations the sense of wrongness may be so overwhelming as to immediately suggest the appropriate changes. Such is the case with

homelessness, as this work will argue later. In general, though, the sense of wrongness is only a spur to discourse, not a resolution, as with the issue of speed limits, also discussed later.

LTOITE As a Guide to Public Policy

When I feed the poor, I am called a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, I am called a communist.

-- Archbishop Helder Camara

In its original context the LTOITE figure of speech contemplates only face-to-face relationships. This section shows how (and that) LTOITE applies even to policy issues. We start by showing that while “relationship” has a different meaning in the policy arena than in directly interpersonal contact, the sense of interpersonal connectedness still applies. The remainder of the section deals with several new objections to LTOITE that arise as we try to shift to this less intimate arena.

Micro and Macro

The previous section spoke only to immediately interpersonal morality, not to public policy, because the LTOITE image arises from face-to-face contact. Two people talk over a situation, they decide what to do, they shake hands, and that’s that. This is not to say that they find the decision equally valuable; in many situations these agreements might not even produce a “win-win” outcome. Nevertheless, given the situation facing them, including their limited ability to invent or evaluate possible solutions, each can LTOITE.

But how can this image be applied to public policy, where laws, institutions, and settled customs decide issues that apply to thousands or millions of people unknown to each other? Who are we supposed to look in the eye, particularly when public policy requires that particularism be avoided? How can we avoid theorization when knowing so relatively few people? And in any

case, who is doing the looking -- all humans? all citizens? all policymakers? How can the intimacy of LTOITE be applied to a vast, anonymous, modern society?

These questions reflect the so-called micro-macro problem -- the difficulty in understanding large systems as the mere extension and aggregation of smaller units. The present work addresses this problem by recognizing that public policy in all its forms represents a relationship we are choosing among ourselves. ("Choosing" is overstated, but let us keep the term for the moment; suitable revisions are given below.) We relate to each other through the less personal means of public policy because we are incapable of regulating collective affairs through individual, face-to-face agreements, and the advantages of larger, less personal organization seem to outweigh its clumsiness. This is not to deny that local understandings can be worked out face to face against the broad background of public policy; indeed, where such local understandings have no broader consequences, they can even supplant public policy. In general, however, modern society organizes itself through the broad-brush means of public policy. Consequently, relationships have two separate forms: unmediated relationships we can create face to face, and relationships that are mediated through the clumsiness of public policy.

The important point is that even with people we do not know, *we are still in a relationship*. Our laws and public policies create a system impacting each of us, in effect constituting a relationship between us. In dealings with one another we are each affirming this relationship: "Even though I do not know you, I am affirming a system that affects and obligates both of us, just as the terms of a face-to-face agreement affect and obligate each of us." When we see one another in terms of such a relationship, LTOITE again becomes a guide to behavior. Even though the relationship is mediated through this system, it is still our relationship. The

question LTOITE poses remains, “Can I affirm this relationship with you and still look you in the eye?”

To make the meaning of this question clear we need to address two issues: in what capacity are we speaking, and to whom are we speaking? The first answer is straightforward: we are speaking as ourselves. For the purpose of LTOITE it makes no difference whether we are a lawmaker, a fellow citizen, or any other human being. We are still in a relationship with others. Of course, different institutions mediate the relationships we have with different others. With fellow citizens, our relationships are mediated through the common institutions and customs of country / culture, while with people from other countries relationships are mediated through the institutions and customs of international relations. In each of these cases, we can still ask whether we can affirm the mediated relationship and still look the other in the eye. It also does not matter whether we are a policymaker or an ordinary citizen. These statuses obviously affect how directly we can determine the relationship but not whether we can affirm it.

To what extent is the term “choice” appropriate to these mediated relationships? It seems unrealistic to say that we choose the form of mediation. We may vote, and our vote may affect who represents us, and our representatives may affect some of the policies and institutions mediating our relationships, but this seems distant from “choosing” the mediation. The issue seems more whether each of us *acquiesces* with the mediating policies and institutions, not whether we “choose” them in some remote, theoretical sense. So is it possible to look anyone in the eye if we can say to them, “Gee, I don’t like the mediating policies and institutions placed between us, but I have little power to alter them”? And if so, does this not make LTOITE a worthless guide?

Genuine powerlessness does indeed allow us to look another in the eye. Sorrow, horror, shock, anger at the other's situation are all appropriate responses, but they need not prevent us from LTOITE. Still, we are rarely completely innocent; our "powerlessness" often slides into acquiescence or even tacit agreement. In general, inaction makes us complicit in the mediating institutions and policies even if we verbally oppose them.

In the real world, however, we find ourselves opposing so many institutions and policies that resistance seems an overwhelming burden. The genocide in Sudan beckons us, as does the hunger of children world-wide, low voter turnout, the bullying behavior of the neighbor's kid, the indifference of corporations to consumer complaints, fetal alcohol syndrome, the exclusion of third parties in the two-party system, and so on. In consequence, we may feel guilty to various extents in our varying complicities and yet be unable to resist such complicity effectively. So, again, can LTOITE really provide any guidance amidst this bewildering complexity of a real life?

There is not the space for the full working-out of these complex issues; what follows cannot be definitive but only suggestive. First, LTOITE allows one to recognize the problems in the first place, regardless of one's ability to solve them. One may be unable to do anything immediately about one's complicity, but LTOITE keeps one aware of it. Second, LTOITE also provides a way of dealing with people less confrontationally, so that resistance to complicity becomes less of a life burden and more of an easy way of relating to others. LTOITE involves opening oneself as well as offering oneself, which makes interactions a conversation rather than a war. Third, LTOITE provides a foundation for what philosophers term "the division of moral labor." A single person cannot solve every social problem, so the labor necessary for our continued joint survival must be divided among us to some extent. Whether it is shared equally

and appropriately is a problem, but certainly people can choose which wheel to put their shoulder to by recognizing what touches them the most, i.e., by recognizing who they are least able to look in the eye.

Public Policy Is Inevitably Clumsy

As noted above, public policy is a clumsy way for people to relate. In a large and diverse society, the very uniformity of laws and institutions hampers moral treatment -- as if we were sewing wearing oven mitts or shaving with a chainsaw. It may appear that this clumsiness prevents the use of the LTOITE perspective. After all, what is the point of looking someone in the eye if all one can say is, "Sorry -- your concerns are only a minute part of society as a whole, and we cannot make policy for you alone"? Is it not more useful and appropriate to heed people's preferences only in the aggregate, i.e., through elections and surveys? If we start looking individuals in the eye, are we not just inviting the chaos of particularism that public policy seeks to avoid?

These objections are valid in their own terms, serving as a reminder of how *not* to apply LTOITE to the public domain. But LTOITE has a different purpose. Without seeking to bypass public policy, it forces us to face policy's effects in immediate, concrete terms. LTOITE resists our ignoring the effects of policies. It forces us to confront a reality we might otherwise avoid: the hurts policies inflict upon others and, often, the difficulty of aiding one group without hurting others. It is hard to face others' pain; it is also hard to face the fact that nothing can be done about it. It is easy to understand why we might seek to avoid LTOITE, protecting ourselves through the anonymity and impersonality of elections and surveys. Nevertheless, even if LTOITE is psychologically demanding, it remains a useful guide.

Is LTOITE Always Good?

In many situations in the United States, people actively avoid eye contact. Looking someone in the eye can be dangerous, making one a target of the other's emotional distresses; in any event, it is emotionally exhausting to encounter so many people so fully and constantly. In such situations LTOITE seems both risky and wearing.

Replying to this objection requires a more nuanced understanding of the LTOITE perspective. LTOITE is not a moral imperative itself but rather a guide to moral action. It does not command us to LTOITE, but it does ask us to notice when and why we cannot. The very fact that we find LTOITE risky and wearing tells us something about the moral price paid for living as we do. This is not to blame the individuals who are caught in living this way, but it is to recognize the price of the collective choice we have made.

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Rather than pursue these abstract discussions of LTOITE, let us turn to two concrete applications of the perspective. The first example, about policy regarding homelessness, shows how the LTOITE perspective can clarify a policy problem in non-trivial ways. The second example, about setting speed limits, shows how the LTOITE perspective can deal even with policy problems that have no clear solution.

Looking the Homeless in the Eye

Let us see how the LTOITE perspective approaches the issue of responding to the homeless people encountered in any major U.S. city. For occasional visitors not inured to their presence, the homeless call up a welter of emotions: sympathy, nobility, obligation, grief, suspicion, fear, disapproval, helplessness, self-protection, penuriousness, self-condemnation ... and anger at the

homeless for occasioning these confused feelings.⁵ The situation is made so complex because it jumbles issues of interpersonal morality with issues of public policy. Can the concepts and distinctions made herein help us disentangle these issues and respond in useful ways?

Consider my encounter with a request for money by a homeless man, whom I will call Joe.⁶ At the face-to-face level, the moral issues revolve around the immediate situation. Is Joe truly in need? Will he use the money for food or for liquor, and do I care? What, if anything, can I afford? Regardless of what I give Joe, what can I afford to give to all who ask? These issues are complex enough, but in the end they involve only me, Joe, and my money. True, the issues arise within the overall social context, but they take this context as given -- a fact of life, not a subject of negotiation. However, when we interrogate the social context itself, then our relationship must be seen as mediated by public policy, and Joe and I need to assess whether we agree to it. The issue at this level is not whether I give Joe money but rather whether I (and Joe) can accept a system that places him and me in our respective situations. To look Joe in the eye, I must have a realistic expectation that he will consent to this mediation of our relationship, i.e., the overall socio-economic-political arrangements that bring us together thus. I must have some justification in mind that I can reasonably expect will persuade him. And vice-versa, of course, but we are looking at the situation as I (and my likely readers) encounter it.

A Reasonable Justification of Homelessness

What might a reasonable justification look like? Well, suppose it were known that God has arranged things so that society offers only two social positions -- political science professor and homeless man --, that only one person can be in each position, and that occupancy of these positions is unalterable. In such circumstances I can look Joe in the eye, because the problem of

his homelessness arises from something truly outside my control. Even if it were possible for me and Joe to trade places, this just gives the same problem in reverse; it has not altered the basic issue. And since it has not, Joe and I can see his homelessness as arising not from my oppressive behavior but rather from the way God has structured the world. In these circumstances I am not the cause of Joe's difficulties, or at any rate our actions cannot alter the fact that one of us is going to be homeless and the other well-to-do.

Some Unpersuasive Justifications of Homelessness

Unfortunately, we have no uncontended knowledge of God's arrangements, and in any case the above justification does not reflect what seem to be the workings of U.S. society. The United States has the resources to ensure that no citizen is homeless. Ensuring this will likely mean that some must give up some wealth, perhaps even to such a degree that our total national production declines, but this would still not mean preventing homelessness for one group of people only to inflict it on another. Bill Gates might become slightly poorer as a result of preventing homelessness, both because he might have to pay higher taxes and because higher taxes might mean lower incentives for production, but he will not become homeless. Given these circumstances, the easy justification given above is not defensible. I cannot look Joe in the eye, because I can have no reasonable expectation that he will agree to sacrifice his own life so that I can live a bit better. That there are political forces opposing such a policy is a separate question; the concern here is simply establishing what we want to accomplish in the first place.

From the LTOITE perspective, homelessness is a major policy problem, but a number of objections have been lodged against this conclusion. They are listed below, grouped into three categories: (i) a theoretical justification of the existence of homelessness, (ii) objections to

applying the LTOITE perspective, and (iii) practical difficulties of applying the perspective in this policy area.

[Table I about here]

1. “However unfortunate Joe’s circumstances may be, society as a whole benefits when initiative and success are rewarded and failure penalized.”

I doubt that society benefits when we are so alienated from one another as to view failure as a good thing, even if our purpose is to provide an incentive for success. The presence of failure may foster greater production, but social life itself is degraded. I also doubt the existence of any neutral definition of “success” (Chilton & Meyer, 2000). But since this seems to be a minority opinion, let us even assume that the presumption is correct, i.e., that we possess a neutral definition of success and that society benefits in the aggregate from failure having severe consequences. To look Joe in the eye, I would have to be able to tell him not only that I appreciate the benefits to me and others that arise from his service as an object lesson but also that I honestly believe he can agree that these benefits compensate for his occupying his situation. I simply cannot say that, and frankly, I doubt anyone can. Lacking Joe’s agreement, such a justification reflects a separation between us, not a looking of him in the eye. It seems to me that this justification serves only to ease the consciences of the well-to-do as they speak to each other *about* Joe instead of *to* him. The acid test -- whether one can expect Joe to agree -- is not carried out.

The next four objections aim not to defend homelessness but to reject the requirement of looking the other in the eye in that situation.

2. “The real question is whether, as Rawls (1971) argues, Joe would have agreed to

have taken his chances in the original position, not knowing how things would turn out. Obviously Joe will oppose a system in which he has become the loser. It is a false criterion to demand someone's consent to a system after its results are known."

3. "Don't impose your values on Joe. Not everyone necessarily wants to have a settled, middle-class life -- or even shelter."
4. "Society is a battle for survival of the fittest, and I won. I worked hard for my success; Joe failed on his own. I am not the cause of his failure, nor, more generally, am I responsible for him. For all these reasons I do not share your sense of guilt about Joe, and I don't grant any moral compulsion to look him in the eye."
5. "I simply do not agree with you, and I am not obligated to convince you I am right. I don't answer to you, and you have no right to substitute your judgment for mine."

These latter four objections misconstrue the LTOITE perspective. They reject any imposition of its perspective -- but imposition is not my purpose. The argument presented here is simply that LTOITE is a useful criterion for testing one's moral judgments. Each of the objections seeks in effect to change the focus of the discussion from Joe to me, but it is Joe's consent that is in question, not mine. The objections seem to be an avoidance of this issue rather than a rebuttal of it.

Objection 2 deserves a more detailed response. A Rawlsian response is that Joe's consent is necessary in order to maintain the connection that Rawls (1971, esp. Part III) tries so hard to make between the Just and the Good. Rawls's argument is not only that agreements in the

original position are just but also that people would want to exist in a just society. This seems unlikely to me in the case of the homeless. Habermas (1990, p.207) makes a similar point when he says that society must meet morality halfway. But beyond this Rawlsian / Habermasian response, my personal response is that I find I cannot look someone in the eye and tell them that I am trading off their pain for my own benefit, not when their pain is so great and comprehensive and my own benefit is so minor in comparison.

Three final objections argue that the LTOITE perspective is impractical. Because their reasons are so diverse, they are addressed individually.

6. “When I try to talk to Joe, he just starts yelling at me and refuses to look at me. When I start talking about the collective benefits of capitalism, he does not understand what I am saying and just keeps demanding money. In short, he is irrational, emotionally and/or cognitively. You say that the LTOITE perspective is determinedly concrete, but I do not see how looking him in the eye can guide me here.”

There is no denying that many of the homeless can be irrational. But it is here that face-to-face and systemic relationships differ most. On a face-to-face level, I may have great difficulty reaching any agreement with Joe. But at a systemic level I seek not so much Joe’s specific agreement as my own ability to look him in the eye and believe he could agree to this structuring of society. True, Joe’s irrationality means that I have to fall back on the very theoretical perspective that I earlier condemned; in other words, it makes me answer for Joe instead of listen to him.⁷ But this is not entirely fatal to the LTOITE perspective. First, the fact remains that I have offered and opened myself, and these bring an honesty and clarity to my thinking even if they

lead nowhere with Joe. Second, Joe is not the only homeless person in the world. It seems insufficient to say, “Well, I talked to a homeless guy, but he was crazy, so I’m off the hook.” I am free to attempt the same offering and opening with others, not all of whom will be as unhelpful as Joe. Finally, even if all homeless acted like Joe, I can still fall back on certain things -- all right, theories -- that I am pretty sure of, namely, that even irrational, ranting people suffer as I would from cold, from sleeping on concrete, from being ill, from being hungry, from being lonely, from feeling disoriented and afraid, from being abused by bullies and roused by police. Even if in the end I know no more of Joe than this, I still cannot look him in the eye and accept a system with those consequences.

7. “We have many programs to address homelessness and poverty, but some people cannot be helped, or at least we have reached the point of diminishing returns in our attempts to help. To put this another way, are not you demanding that our society sacrifice everything in order to solve the problem of homelessness, ignoring all the other problems that need to be addressed?”

There are certainly many social problems besides homelessness, and it is not reasonable to sacrifice everything on the altar of this problem. However, my sense is that the social problem of homelessness arises not from a failure of funding but from a failure of will. Homeless shelters are inexpensive to maintain, and there are several alternatives to shelters in any case.⁸ We seem far from a point where additional money spent on the homeless is traded off against other, equally worthy goals. The basic problem is not money but rather the general ideological belief that homeless people deserve their fate and a sense that in any case we have no personal responsibility for alleviating their situation. And these beliefs determine not just the amount of money spent --

insufficient -- but also the disrespectful manner in which this insufficient amount is spent. To quote Martin Luther King, Jr., “True compassion is more than flinging a coin at a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” So at least for me, now, I cannot make this argument and look Joe in the eye.

8. “O.k. -- suppose that I too believe that our society is unjust and that homelessness is our greatest national disgrace. I can look Joe in the eye and say that. But I have a life to live too, and it seems unreasonable for either you or Joe to demand that I spend all of it working to end homelessness. My life would be torn apart if I were to run it according to your LTOITE guide. So I say to Joe, ‘I think this situation is unjust, but I am not going to spend much (if any) time rectifying it.’ Nor am I going to take a field trip to a homeless shelter just to test out my attitude. I may not be able to look Joe in the eye as I say this, but I do not see any reasonable alternative.”

While there is some merit to this objection, there are several complexities that need sorting out. First, as discussed earlier, LTOITE is a guide to where the shoe pinches; it is not a shoe factory. It sensitizes us to injustice, but it does not tell us how to create a just system. Second, in regard to “field trips”: it is the job of policymakers to assess these injustices firsthand. If that requires field trips, so be it. And even non-policymakers can perform numerous ordinary acts, from considering these issues while voting, to simply grunting in approval or disapproval when reading letters to the editor. Third, I agree that one is not required to sacrifice one’s life just because so many injustices exist. But again, LTOITE is a guide, not an imperative. It may be that some theory of justice will show how we should divide our efforts, but even without one, some division

of moral labor between issues seems necessary and even desirable. Finally, I note that there must also be a division of one's attention among different people, with some attention given to oneself, some to one's family and friends, and some to those more distant from us. This can be justified not just because we know and can look after our interests better than other people do but also because we cannot care for remote others without developing and exercising our faculties of self-awareness and empathy in relationships with those near to us. Without such self-awareness and empathy, we are likely to become that most dangerous of creatures: someone who, as the old expression goes, loves humanity but hates people.

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Note -- to acknowledge this specifically -- that the topic has shifted from Joe to homelessness, that is, from face-to-face relations to policy. At the face-to-face level, there remains the confusion of all the questions noted at the start of this section. At the policy level, however, the LTOITE perspective has clarified the issue considerably, and this clarification rebounds to clarify the face-to-face encounter by pointing out the latter's insolubility. I do what I can to end homelessness as a whole -- writing articles like this, for example -- and find that I can then look the Joes of this world more in the eye, regardless of what I happen to give them.

LTOITE and Discourse: Setting Speed Limits

From the LTOITE perspective, homelessness is a relatively straightforward policy issue, both because it is so miserable a condition and because cheap, effective remedies clearly exist.

However, most policy problems are much more complex: they involve numerous, relatively equal claims, where addressing one claim requires ignoring others and even imposing further costs on the other claim-holders. Of what value is LTOITE when it does not reveal any clear policy

direction? To answer this question, we now consider the problem of setting highway speed limits.

Setting speed limits is a complex policy issue. Motorists have the competing interests of wanting to go fast, wanting to be safe, and -- related to safety -- wanting everyone to go roughly the same speed. (We could add other interests than speed, safety, and uniformity, but the complexity of the issue is already apparent.) Nor are motorists the only ones affected; also included must be the members of their families and communities, whose interests may be separate from the motorists'; oil companies, who wish to sell their products; and even the country as a whole, contemplating issues of global warming and U.S. dependence on oil. In the case of homelessness we can identify the homeless as our first concern, since theirs is the situation we most need to justify, but there is no equivalent in speed limit policy; no one's concerns are uniquely compelling. In these circumstances, how does LTOITE guide us?

The LTOITE perspective offers no miraculous solutions, but neither does it lead us astray. Facing complex policy issues, the perspective simply reinforces the central norm of democratic government: policymakers should engage with everyone affected by an issue. This means hearing from them, to be sure, but it also means more than that: it means searching out those concerned instead of piously hoping they appear; it means opening oneself to them, not merely watching them talk; it means talking to the real people concerned, not simply to their putative representatives; it means offering one's own responses, not merely sitting silently in judgment.⁹ Even if the LTOITE perspective provides no easy solution to complex issues, it can still guide the process by which they are decided. Even though no one ever knows whether a decision is right in some absolute sense, we *can* know how we dealt with each other in the deciding. At heart, the LTOITE perspective is an ethic of process, not of outcome. It assumes we will try our best to

decide issues well, but it also recognizes that we lack any reliable means of assessing those decisions. In the end, it says, all we can really control is whether our decisions allow us to LTOITE.

Thinking Backward

Social norms arise out of two distinct, parallel processes: a background process of public discourse and a foreground process of event-driven decision. “Politics” or “policymaking” is the foreground process. Its unpleasant, even brutal nature arises ultimately not from humans’ Hobbesian nature but rather from our existential condition of having to make decisions, ready or not. Our finite, incarnated existence pushes decisions on us regardless of any affirmative desire on our part. Even if we simply allow nature to take its course without a policy, that decision imposes its own set of consequences. Our self-awareness permits us to refrain from action, but it cannot release us from responsibility for our choices. The fact that we must make decisions even in ignorance, the fact that we unintentionally do harm through ignorance and clumsiness, failing to do the good we intend -- these are parts of the tragedy of human existence.

Nevertheless, this tragic nature of policy-making applies only to the foreground policy process, one that takes place against the background of another process, the public discourse by which we come to more general, more stable agreements with each other -- including how we want to make those foreground decisions. This background process is driven by the need to LTOITE, including a need to LTOITE even after temporary decisions are compelled. Taking care with decisions cannot guarantee their correctness, but it can guarantee that we can LTOITE afterwards. Even if perfection lies beyond our reach, being able to LTOITE in our imperfection remains a worthy goal.

The LTOITE image is subjective and thus does not directly or clearly specify any norms. Nevertheless, it remains a useful guide. It can indicate norms when applied to extreme cases like homelessness. Further, it is not just a figure of speech; even if subjective and imprecise, it can nevertheless provide a reliable, powerful reminder of when (and why) one is straying. Overall, then, LTOITE seems to handle the subjectivity of morality appropriately, not by canonizing subjectivity, which leads to relativism and nihilism, but by reminding us of the point of moral thought: to relate to one another only through uncoerced agreements.

The LTOITE image is weak, however, to the extent that it requires opportunities to LTOITE in the first place. If we never encounter the homeless, for example, then we are unlikely to challenge the idle justifications of homelessness. In the LTOITE perspective, public discourse is as much about simple attention to others as it is about complex theories and calculations. Theories and calculations can guide us when we are forced to make hasty, contingent decisions, but the background of public discourse depends on offering and opening ourselves. Such discourse is limited by systematic social patterns of interaction and separation. We have easy, regular access to those close to us -- family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and so on -- and in these domains the background process of public discourse proceeds regularly and automatically. With other people, however, we lack easy access: we speak different languages, we speed past them as we commute to work, we fear them and lack a safe space to meet them, the invisibly different assumptions of our disparate cultures confuse and disrupt our interactions, and so on. Where the very organization of society prevents or inhibits policymakers from connecting with the people it disadvantages, such disadvantages can arise and persist. Thus, for example, when we organize the world into nation-states separated by distance, language, and culture, then the

perfectly normal push and pull of politics can yield a world in which some nations are systematically advantaged *and* their citizens are never or rarely brought to look those of other nations in the eye.

The problem is not that some group decides to arrange society both to benefit itself and to exclude others. No conspiracy need exist. In the LTOITE perspective, we need to think backwards in our analysis in order to understand the appearance of conspiracy. First comes the accidental coincidence of gradations of social power and lines of social separation; only then does a stable pattern of advantage and disadvantage manifest itself. Where the gradations of power do not coincide with the lines of social separation, then temporary advantages collapse as the advantaged find they cannot look the disadvantaged in the eyes -- and cannot avoid the experience. So some patterns of advantage die an unnoticed, natural death, while others persist simply by virtue of how power differentials and interaction patterns happen to coincide in the contingency of their time. Theorists can then retrospectively identify and condemn the surviving patterns, turning the identifications around to make the patterns appear natural facts, or perhaps social facts held in place by a cabal of the powerful.

Such an identification has two unfortunate consequences. First, it solidifies the social separation, as the advantaged find themselves under attack by the disadvantaged and draw together to protect themselves. Second, such identification obscures the existence of other patterns of separation, a case in point being (some) Marxists' inability to recognize sexism and racism as distinct forms of oppression, assimilating them to a class-based analysis. In other words, if we fail to think backwards, as expressed above, then we lock ourselves into a limited social self-understanding. So while the continual identification of these coincidences of power

and interaction is a centrally important form of social analysis, knowledge of them leads, in the LTOITE perspective, to a politics not of opposition but of interaction.

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NOTES

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1. Note the use of the first person singular. Such usage is unusual in a professional work, but I cite my experience not as proof but only to assist you, the reader, in recognizing your own experience. This is not a claim to an objective reality that can force your agreement.
2. I could equally well have decided to walk away; in that case too I would have said something much like what I said above, and would have felt equally able to look her in the eye.
3. In fact, tone of voice can be more revealing than visual contact. Sometimes in the midst of group discussions I will stop looking at people and even stop listening to the content of their words, listening instead to their tone of voice as a way of understanding what lies behind their words.
4. This language is that of Fisher et al. (1991), who discuss interpersonal negotiations rather than LTOITE, but whose analysis is directly applicable to it.
5. Actually, one never really gets inured to their presence. Even if repeated encounters with the homeless result in an apparent callousness, feelings of distress remain with us like an abscess in our sense of meaning: always weakening us and sometimes actively harmful, forgotten in their

constant presence and yet still painful when awareness touches them.

6. Again, the first person singular is required here to acknowledge that all I can speak to is *my* ability to look Joe in the eye.

7. Still, we might try to put up with some amount of getting yelled at. Even abuse can communicate something underneath.

8. Besides shelter itself, the homeless need secure places to store their possessions, places to receive mail, places to clean up, places to get basic health care, and so on. And they need to have these things without social opprobrium, including the belief that they are being given “charity.” These things are not expensive to provide -- particularly the last.

9. I recall a department meeting at another university many years ago in which we considered a student’s petition to waive a degree requirement. No one said a word as the student presented his case. He presented it poorly, but the faculty were apparently willing to vote on (i.e., deny) the petition without key concerns being discussed -- for example, why the same waiver would not apply to all other students. Finally, seeing that no one else was going to speak up and that the student was about to leave, I asked him directly about this issue. He said that he could not think of any distinction between his case and others’, and after he left, we duly denied his petition. So what difference did it make to question him, given that it almost certainly changed no one’s vote, let alone the outcome? First, the student understood the decision and its justification better. He might not have liked the outcome, but at least he would know that we had considered his arguments carefully. Second, I could look him in the eye afterwards, having satisfied myself of the reasonableness of my vote. Third, it pushed for a departmental culture in which issues were decided through discourse, not the indifference of power.

Table I

Eight Arguments That LTOITE Does Not Apply to Homelessness

#	Argument
1	Society benefits in the aggregate.
2	Justice, in Rawls's original position, is determined without knowing one's eventual social status.
3	Homelessness can be an individual's choice.
4	Unless I have committed force or fraud, I need not apologize for my place in society
5	I simply reject your LTOITE standard.
6	Looking the homeless in the eye invites abuse and conflict, not discourse or clarity.
7	With so many existing programs for the homeless and with facing so many other social needs, we have reached the point of diminishing returns where further aid would be better spent elsewhere.
8	The LTOITE perspective seems to lead to an inhumanly complete self-sacrifice.