PROF. Michael Sandel: Today we turn to Kant's reply to Aristotle.
Kant thinks that Aristotle just made a mistake.
It's one thing, Kant says, to support a fair framework of rights within which people can pursue their own conceptions of the good life.
It's something else, it's something that runs the risk of coercion, to base law or principles of justice on any particular conception of the good life.
You remember Aristotle says, in order to investigate the ideal constitution, we have first to figure out the best way to live.
Kant would reject that idea.
He says that constitutions and laws and rights should not embody, or affirm, or promote, any particular way of life.
That's at odds with freedom.
For Aristotle, the whole point of law, the purpose of the polis, is to shape character, to cultivate the virtue of citizens, to inculcate civic excellence, to make possible a good way of life.
That's what he tells us in the Politics.
For Kant, on the other hand, the purpose of law, the point of a constitution, is not to inculcate or to promote virtue.
It's to set up a fair framework of rights within which citizens may be free to pursue their own conceptions of the good for themselves.
So we see the difference in their theories of justice.
We see the difference in their accounting of law, or the role of a constitution, the point of politics.
And underlying these differences are two different accounts of what it means to be a free person.
For Aristotle, we're free insofar as we have the capacity to realize our potential.
And that leads us to the question of fit, fit between persons and the roles that are appropriate to them.
Figuring out what I'm cut out for.
That's what it means to lead a free life, to live up to my potential.
Kant rejects that idea and instead substitutes his famously demanding notion of freedom as the capacity to act autonomously.
Freedom means acting according to a law I give

myself, freedom as autonomy.
Part of the appeal, part of the moral force of the view of Kant and of Rawls, consists in the conception of the person as a free and independent self capable of choosing his or her own ends.
The image of the self as free and independent offers, if you think about it, a powerful, liberating vision.
Because what it says, is that as free moral persons we are not bound by any ties of history, or of tradition, or of inherited status, that we haven't chosen for ourselves.
And so we're unbound by any moral ties prior to our choosing them.
And that means that we are free and independent sovereign selves.
We're the authors of the only obligations that constrain us.
The communitarian critics of Kantian and Rawlsian liberalism acknowledge that there is something powerful and inspiring in that account of freedom, the free independent choosing self, but they argue it misses something.
It misses a whole dimension of moral life and even political life.
It can't make sense of our moral experience because it can't account for certain moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize and even prize.
And these include obligations of membership, loyalty, solidarity, and other moral ties that may claim us for reasons that we can't trace to an act of consent.
Alasdair MacIntyre gives an account, what he calls a narrative conception of the self.
It's a different account of the self.
Human beings are essentially storytelling creatures, MacIntyre argues.
"That means I can only answer the question 'what am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question of 'what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" That's what he means by the narrative conception of the self.
What does this have to do with the idea of community and belonging?
MacIntyre says this, "once you accept this narrative aspect of moral reflection, you will notice that we can never seek for the good or exercise the virtues only as individuals.
We all approach our circumstance as bearers of particular social identities.
I am someone's son or daughter, a citizen of this or that city.

I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation.
Hence, MacIntyre argues, "what is good for me has to be the good for someone who inhabits these roles.
I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation a variety of debts, inheritances, expectations and obligations.
These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point.
This is, in part, what gives my life its moral particularity."
That's the narrative conception of the self.
And it's a conception that sees the self as claimed or encumbered, at least to some extent, by the history, the tradition, the communities of which it's a part.
We can't make sense of our lives.
Not only as a psychological matter, but also as a moral matter in thinking what we ought to do without attending to these features about us.
Now, MacIntyre recognizes that this narrative account, this picture of the encumbered self, puts his account at odds with contemporary liberalism and individualism.
From the standpoint of individualism, I am what I myself choose to be.
I may biologically be my father's son, but I can't be held responsible for what he did, unless I choose to assume such responsibility.
I can't be held responsible for what my country does or has done, unless I choose to assume such responsibility.
But MacIntyre says this reflects a certain kind of moral shallowness, even blindness.
It's a blindness at odds with the full measure of responsibility, which sometimes, he says, involves collective responsibility, or responsibilities that may flow from historic memories.
And he gives some examples.
Such individualism is expressed by those contemporary Americans who deny any responsibility for the effects of slavery upon black Americans, saying, I never owned any slaves.
Or the young German who believes that having been born after 1945 means that what Nazis did to Jews has no moral relevance to his relationship to his Jewish contemporaries.
MacIntyre says all of these attitudes of historical amnesia amount to a kind of moral abdication.
Once you see that who we are and what it means to sort out our obligations

can't be separated, shouldn't be separated, from the life histories
that define us.
"The contrast," he says, "for the narrative account is clear.
For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those
communities from which I derive my identity.
I am born with a past, and try to cut myself off from that past is to deform
my present relationships."
So there you have, in MacIntyre, a strong statement of the idea that the
self can't be detached, shouldn't be detached, from its particular ties of
membership, history, story, narrative.
Now I want to get your reactions to the communitarian critique of the
individualist, or the voluntarist, the unencumbered self.
But let's make it concrete so that you can react to more than just
the theory of it.
By looking at the two different accounts of moral and political
obligation that arise, depending on which of these conceptions of the
person one accepts.
On the liberal conception, moral and political obligations arise
in one of two ways.
There are natural duties that we owe human beings as such, duties of
respect for persons qua persons.
These obligations are universal.
Then, as Rawls points out, there are also voluntary obligations,
obligations that we owe to particular others insofar as we have agreed,
whether through a promise, or a deal, or a contract.
Now the issue between the liberal and communitarian accounts of the self--
is there another category of obligation or not?
The communitarian says there is.
There is a third category that might be called obligations of solidarity,
or loyalty, or membership.
The communitarian argues that construing all obligations as either
natural duties or voluntary obligations fails to capture
obligations of membership or solidarity.
Loyalties whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them
is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the
particular persons we are.
What would be some examples?

And then I want to see how you would react to them.
Examples of obligations of membership that are particular, but don't necessarily flow from consent, but rather from membership, narrative, community, one situation.
The most common examples are ones to do with the family, the relation between parents and children, for example.
Suppose there were two children drowning.
You could save only one of them.
One was your child, the other was a stranger's child.
Would you have an obligation to flip a coin?
Or would there be something morally obtuse if you didn't rush to save your child?
Now you may say, well, parents have agreed to have their children.
So take the other case, the case of children's obligation for their parents.
Now, we don't choose our parents.
We don't even choose to have parents.
There is that asymmetry.
And yet, consider two aging parents, one of them yours, the other a stranger's.
Doesn't it make moral sense to think that you have a greater obligation to look after your aging parent, than to flip a coin, or to help the strangers.
Now, is this traceable to consent?
Not likely.
Or take a couple of political examples.
During World War II, French resistance pilots flew bombing raids over occupied France.
One day, one of the pilots received his target and noticed that the village he was being asked to bomb was his home village.
He refused, not disputing that it was as necessary as the target he bombed yesterday.
He refused on the ground that he couldn't bring himself-- it would be a special moral crime for him to bomb his people, even in a cause that he supported, the cause of liberating France.
Now, do we admire that?
If we do, the communitarian argues, it's because we do recognize obligations of solidarity.

Take another example.
Some years ago there was a famine in Ethiopia.
Hundreds of thousands of people were starving.
The Israeli government organized an airlift to rescue Ethiopian Jews.
They didn't have the capacity to rescue everyone in Ethiopia, and they
rescued several hundred Ethiopian Jews.
Now, what's your moral assessment?
Is that a kind of morally troubling partiality, a kind of prejudice?
Or as the Israeli government thought, is there a special obligation of
solidarity that this airlift properly responded to?
Well, that takes us to the broader question of patriotism.
What, morally speaking, is to be said for patriotism?
There are two towns named Franklin.
One is Franklin, Texas, and the other is just across the Rio Grande River,
Franklin, Mexico.
What is the moral significance of national boundaries?
Why is it, or is it the case, that we as Americans have a greater
responsibility for the health and the education and the welfare and public
provision for people who live in Franklin, Texas, than equally needy
people just across the river living in Franklin, Mexico.
According to the communitarian account, membership does matter.
And the reason patriotism is at least potentially a virtue, is that it is an
expression of the obligations of citizenship.
How many are sympathetic to the idea that there is this third category of
obligation, the obligations of solidarity or membership?
How many are sympathetic to that idea?
And how many are critical of that idea?
How many think all obligations can be accounted for in the first two ways.
All right, let's hear from the critics of the communitarian idea first.
PATRICK: My biggest concern that if having obligations because you're a
member of something, or because of solidarity, is that it seems that if
you accept those obligations as being sort of morally binding, then there's
a greater occurrence of overlapping obligations, a greater occurrence of
good versus good.
And I don't know if this sort of framework allows us to
choose between them.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Good, and what's your name?

PATRICK: Patrick.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: So you worry that if we recognize obligations of membership or solidarity, since we inhabit different communities, their claims might conflict.
And what would we do if we have competing obligations?
PATRICK: Yes.
NICOLA: Well, one solution is that we could view ourselves as ultimately members of the human community.
And that then within that we have all these smaller spheres of that I am American, or I am a student at Harvard.
And so the most important community to be obligated to is the community of human beings.
And then from there, you can sort of evaluate which other ones are most important to you.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: So the most universal-- and what's your name?
NICOLA: Nicola.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: So Nicola, you say the most universal community we inhabit, the community of humankind, always takes precedence?
NICOLA: Yes.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Patrick, are you satisfied?
PATRICK: No.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Why not?
PATRICK: It seems rather arbitrary that we should choose the universal obligation over the more specific obligation.
I might also say that I should be obligated first to the most specific of my obligations.
For instance, take my family as a small unit of solidarity.
Perhaps I should be first obligated to that unit, and then perhaps to the unit of my town, and then my country, and then the human race.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Good.
Thank you.
I want to hear from another critic of the communitarian view.
We have the objection, well, what if goods collide?
Who objects to the whole idea of it?
Who sees patriotism as just a kind of prejudice that ideally we should overcome?
Yes.

ELIZABETH: Patriotism reflects a community membership that's a given.
I think the problem is that whereas some memberships are natural
narratives, the narrative of citizenship is a constructed one.
And I think a false one because as the river is just a historical accident,
it makes no sense because the lottery of birth threw me into the United
States as opposed to Mexico, that that's the membership that I
should be a part of.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Good.
And what's your name?
ELIZABETH: Elizabeth.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Elizabeth.
Who has a reply?
Yes.
SPEAKER: I think in general, we have to ask where do our moral obligations
arise from anyway?
And I think basically there'd be two places from which they could arise.
One would be kin, and another one would be reciprocity.
The closer you are associated to other people, there's a natural reciprocity
there in terms of having interactions with those people.
You interact with the neighbors on your street, with the other people in
your country through economic arrangements.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: But I don't know and you don't know those people in Franklin,
Texas, any more than you know the people in Franklin, Mexico, do you?
SPEAKER: Presumably you're naturally more connected with the people in your
own country, in terms of interaction and trade, than you are with people in
other countries.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Good.
Who else?
Go ahead.
RENA: Yeah, I think that a lot of the basis for our patriotism can be
compared to like school spirit or even house spirit that we see here, where
freshman are sorted into houses, and then within a day they have developed
some sort of attachment or a pride associated with that house.
And so I think that we can probably draw a distinction between a moral
obligation for communitarian beliefs, and sort of just a sentimental
emotional attachment.
PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Good.

Wait, stay there.

What's your name?

RENA: Rena.

PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Go back to my example about the obligation of the child to the parent.

Would you say the same thing there?

It may or may not be a sentimental tie, but it has no moral weight.

RENA: Well, I mean, I'm not entirely certain that accident in the initial stages something that will preclude like moral obligations later.

So just because we are randomly sorted into a house, or just because we don't choose who our parents are, or what country we were born into, doesn't necessarily mean that we won't develop an obligation based on some type of benefit, I guess.

Which is sort of--

PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: So your obligation to your aging parent, that's greater than to aging parents around the world, is only because and insofar as you're repaying a benefit that your parent gave you when you were growing up?

RENA: Yeah, I would say that if you look at cases of adoption, where you have a biological parent somewhere else that you don't interact with, and then you have a parent who adopted you, most people would say that if you had to pick between them, in the case of aging parents, that your obligation would lie more with the person who raised you and who had exchanges with you meaningfully.

PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: May I ask you one more question about the parent?

RENA: Sure.

PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: Do you think that a person with a bad parent owes them less?

RENA: I don't know, because I've never had a bad parent.

PROF. MICHAEL SANDEL: I think that's a good place to end.

We'll continue with this next time.

Thank you.