

So Many Kinds of Wrong: A Theological Response to the Rwanda Asylum Initiative

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Perhaps like many others, when I heard of the British government's Rwanda asylum initiative, announced on April 14 this year, I initially thought it was a line from the BBC Radio 4 show *The News Quiz*. It seemed so obviously to be a spoof of the government's attempts to distract from Partygate. When I became persuaded that this wasn't an April fool, again like others I struggled to articulate why it seemed such a terrible plan. At that point I recalled one of the most applicable phrases I picked up from living for several years in the United States: 'so many kinds of wrong.' The Rwanda asylum initiative is so many kinds of wrong. But one of the features such ideas have is that it's hard to put your finger on which of the wrong things is the big one. What I've noticed talking with people over the last two months is that those who vehemently oppose the policy struggle to say precisely why. So tonight I want to do my best to offer some vocabulary and structures of thought that can help those who think this policy is so many kinds of wrong explain what's so wrong about it. I'm going to take my argument in five stages.

Consequential

I'll start by taking the proposal at face value, and engage in the ostensible reasons why the Prime Minister and Home Secretary are advocating it. This is what, in the language of ethics, is called consequentialism – where the means are justified so long as they serve appropriate ends, and where you assume you're working with competing givens, so the moral validity of your actions is determined by the ensuing results.

The government's idea is that single men who cross the Channel to the UK on boats or lorries will be given a one-way plane ticket to Rwanda. The action is designed to stop 'vile people smugglers' turning the ocean into a 'watery graveyard', with the plan designed to break their business model. Rwanda is said to have the 'capacity to resettle tens of thousands of people in the years ahead.' It would put the migrants through an asylum process. At the end of that process, if they were successful, it would provide them with long-term accommodation in Rwanda. The Prime Minister said the £120m scheme would 'save countless lives' from human trafficking. Instead of housing migrants in hotels and detention centres, the whole problem would be taken offshore.

The underlying assumption of this proposal is threefold. One, the UK cannot cope with the extensive immigration so must find ways to stop it. Two, a disproportionate number of those entering the UK have no legitimate reason for doing so, and constitute a burden on our culture and economy. Three, the transport of people in fragile boats is a huge risk to life and the real culprits are not the refugees but the people smugglers who transport them.

Let's quickly run through the thread of logic here. Central is the assertion that the prospect of finding no resting place in UK and instead being flown promptly to Rwanda will deter people from coming to the UK and put the people smugglers out of business. I find this implausible. Those crossing the Channel already risk being sent to oppressive detention centres and remaining there for indefinite periods. If one accepts the flawed distinction between genuine asylum seekers and economic migrants, the economic migrants are already facing a very hostile environment in this country, so the deterrent is already here. What the Rwanda initiative adds is a deterrent for the so-called *genuine* asylum seekers – in other words, the ones the UK is obliged to receive, and the ones who, by definition, have no choice but to leave their country of origin – and are therefore likely to try to cross the Channel regardless how difficult the government makes it and how daunting the prospects of assimilating into British society. So the notion of deterrence doesn't work.

Neither does the assumption that this will put people smugglers out of business. People smugglers are in business for two reasons: because of the large number of people displaced by hostility, poverty and war in their countries of origin, and because of the extensive efforts of other countries to keep those people out. Those two reasons still apply: so people smugglers will remain. They will just get more ingenious and accordingly more exploitative. The issue is the continuous supply of asylum seekers, and the circumstances that keep this supply so large. The government's language is about ending deaths at sea but, as Theresa May has pointed out, those most vulnerable to deaths at sea are women and children and the plan to fly people to Rwanda only refers to men, so the rhetoric and reality don't match up. What's disingenuous about this policy is that it's designed to deter genuine asylum seekers, but it's dressed up in language that suggests the people involved have a real choice – in other words that they're so-called economic migrants, when they're clearly

not. The policy claims to be giving people a choice between non-migration or Rwanda, but really it's trying to force people to stay in France. It's portraying migrants as in the grip of people smugglers but in fact it's making them pawns in a Brexit-shaped arm wrestle between the UK government and the French. Ascribing choice where there is none can become another way of apportioning blame. The scheme is an elaborate project to transfer responsibility from a powerful government to powerless refugee.

In his announcement the Prime Minister quoted the figure of £120m. But again the notion that this is a cost-saving initiative is absurd. It's clear that reputationally this scheme now has to work, or at least to be demonstrated as having worked; but the criteria for 'working,' again cited in the announcement, are extraordinarily vague: it was said that it would 'save countless lives' from human trafficking. It's impossible to calculate the cost-benefit in monetary terms, because no one's counting the amount of money brought into the UK economy by migrants who are granted the right to remain and then pay taxes and generate national wealth. What's clear is that money's no object in the deeper goal, which is evidently to persuade the Conservative core vote and supportive media that the government is intent on reducing cross-Channel immigration.

The final issue on consequential grounds is the destination. Everyone celebrates that Rwanda has pulled itself out of the horrific experience of the 1994 genocide. But it's perfectly possible for the oppressed in turn to become an oppressor. Perhaps the most far-fetched of all the claims made in the April announcement was that Rwanda is one of the safest countries in the world. 'Safe for whom?' is the appropriate response. A quick survey of human rights evaluations yields a rather different impression. The Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 says for example, 'The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front continued to stifle dissenting and critical voices and to target those perceived as a threat to the government and their family members. The space for political opposition, civil society, and media remained closed. Several high-profile critics, including opposition members and commentators using social media or YouTube to express themselves, went missing, were arrested or threatened. Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities was commonplace, and fair trial standards were routinely flouted in cases deemed sensitive.'¹ The UK Prime Minister promised migrants would be 'entitled to full protection under Rwandan law.' According to Human Rights Watch, that's not very much protection.

Has anyone asked, 'Why is Rwanda so keen to proceed with this scheme?' Is it out of the goodness of its government's heart? Of course not. The scheme is a good fit for Rwanda because it's a public endorsement by one of the leading western democracies that Rwanda is a fit and proper place for refugees to find asylum, that they should have every opportunity to flourish there, and that they have nothing to fear. It's a PR exercise. But it's a PR exercise in which the UK is cynically colluding in the hope that the British public will be so pleased to have the issue of drowning migrants and unstable immigrants off the desk that they won't ask too many questions about whether the solution is in fact a plausible one.

The irony that Rwanda is described as a safe place for refugees who have in many cases had to leave their countries for precisely these kinds of reasons is so acute as to be painful. There seems to be a wilful ignorance at work that says something like, 'All these foreigners from the developing world are used to difficult conditions so they'll be fine adapting to Rwanda.' But leaving aside the challenge that they are being shipped from the frying pan of the oppression of their country of origin to the fire of an oppressive regime in Rwanda, there are more subtle factors. One is that Rwanda is one of the least religiously diverse countries in the world, with fewer than 1% of the population Muslim, while 44% of refugees globally are Muslim, with a significantly higher proportion among those crossing the Channel in boats, with 61% coming from the Middle East alone.

This supposedly safe country is actually currently at war. The conflict on Rwanda's western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo recently attracted the grave concern of the President of the African Union. The DRC and Rwanda have been on the brink of war since the mass arrival in eastern Congo of Rwandan Hutus accused of massacring Tutsis during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Kinshasa has frequently accused Kigali of sending troops into its territory and supporting militias there.²

The final irony of the consequentialist dimension of this initiative is that Rwanda is very densely populated country. Rwanda has a population density of 525 per km² (if we're still allowed to use metric measures in this country), which is double that of the UK, which comes in at 281 per km². Rwanda's population density ranks 24th in the world (out of 235), while the UK ranks 51st. Rwanda's population is set nearly to double by 2050. The UK's meanwhile is set to increase in that period by 15% from 67m to 77m. So the irony of shipping migrants from the UK to Rwanda is that by the pure justice of every person having three acres and a cow, we really should be shipping people in the opposite direction.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/rwanda>

² <https://www.africanews.com/2022/05/30/african-union-chief-gravely-concerned-by-rwanda-drc-tension/>

So this quick survey of consequentialist arguments for the Rwanda initiative has shown that all of them fail – the deterrent for migrants, the neutering of smugglers, the use of resources, the safety of the migrants, and the hospitality of Rwanda – every single one of them. I've begun with these arguments because it's a rule of debate that you should begin with your opponent's proposals in their own terms. But my underlying purpose tonight is to articulate the widespread revulsion the policy has evoked. For that, we need to look elsewhere.

Deontological

The second area to consider is what in ethics is called deontological, from the Greek word for duty. This is the territory of right and wrong, where the means can't be justified by the ends.

It's hard to perceive how anybody could regard the Rwanda asylum initiative as right by these standards – it's easier to see how it could instead be regarded as a necessary evil or at a stretch to say the danger posed to the UK by large numbers of immigrants, or perhaps posed to the migrants themselves by the journey across the Channel, requires such a policy. The right and wrong arguments are the preserve of the gut reaction, and the gut reaction in this case is almost entirely negative. Let's take just two dimensions of gut reaction.

The first is, sending people to Rwanda is treating them like garbage. It's based on a primal desire for a problem to go away, and a common reaction of those with means to outsource an undesirable phenomenon to an agency that can just fix it on your behalf. The proclivity of doing this represents some of the least savoury aspects of British culture. No one wakes up aged 16 and feels a longing to work in an abattoir. Those were the jobs Eastern Europeans used to do before we took back control of our abattoirs. Few people are drawn to back-breaking work picking fruit in East Anglia. That's why it's long been part of the grey economy. Not many people are longing to spend all night cleaning offices so they're ready for the next day. That's another one that's long been outsourced. And when we turn from people to things, there's a continued assumption that someone else can take and process our nuclear waste, and offset our carbon consumption. Such things are the underbelly of British society: no one's proud of them, but there's never the political or social will to address them. So it's not hard to see the Rwanda asylum initiative as part of this chain of thinking, that says, 'We're a wealthy country, here's something we don't want to think about or deal with, we'll outsource it the way we've done with other uncomfortable things.' The policy is just the tip of the iceberg. There's a whole iceberg propping it up – an iceberg that facilitates an affluent society. The trouble with calling this policy wrong is we'll have to start scrutinising all those other practices as well. But the truth is, sending people to Rwanda is treating Rwanda like a brownfield site, and the people like landfill. It's a project to stop smugglers trafficking illegally by government trafficking legally. You can only get your head round it if you find a way to depersonalise it – to take away the human faces and real families and broken hearts and traumatised lives, and treat people like a commodity. But here again is the irony – yet another one. The reason the UK regards itself as civilised isn't because we've had a parliament for centuries or we have good universities or we invented most of the world's sports. It's because we don't treat people like commodities. But now it seems we do. You'd assume that since the mid-twentieth century the whole idea that a government could say to a group of people 'We're going to transport you to another place where you'll be safe away from people who hate you' had become unthinkable. But it seems not.

In practice the deontological arguments have started to be played out in court, with the government's policy challenged by whether it conforms to the UN Refugee Convention, which protects people from being sent to a country where they face serious threats to life or freedom, and the European Convention on Human Rights, which states that no one shall be subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The Prime Minister has acknowledged he expected his plan to be subject to challenge in the courts from a 'formidable army of politically motivated lawyers'. But we have repeatedly seen that this Prime Minister regards national and international law as obstacles to be circumvented rather than principles to be respected. Which makes the use of the term 'illegal migrant' yet a further irony.

The second problem on a gut level is what it reveals about an ugly dimension of the gut level. The Rwanda asylum policy was announced eight weeks into the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Britain isn't making Ukrainian refugees gamble with their lives by sitting in fragile boats to cross the Channel; it's flying them in from European airports. The question of what makes Ukrainian refugees acceptable, in fact very welcome, while Iranians (who make up a quarter of those crossing the Channel) are illegal and to be outsourced on site, has only one answer – and it's not a pleasant answer. The Ukrainians are Europeans. In fact, that's a euphemism. The Ukrainians are white.

Soon after Australia became a federation in January 1901, the federal government of Edmund Barton passed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which was the beginning of the White Australia Policy. During World War II, Prime Minister John Curtin said, 'This country shall remain forever the home of the descendants of those people who came here in peace in order to establish in the South Seas an outpost of the British race.'

It's hard to credit such a remark could have been made in a country where the aboriginal people were still abounding in such numbers, despite government suppression. While the policy was subsequently dismantled, and in 1973 formally abolished, it remained in the memory when Australia began using offshore detention centres in 2001. In 2013, Australia amended its immigration law to deny resettlement visas to asylum seekers arriving by boat. More than 4,000 asylum seekers were transferred out of Australia between 2012 and 2019. By its own projections the Australian government will spend £460m on offshore processing in 2021-22. Let's not suppose the Rwanda asylum initiative was the Conservative government's own original idea. Nor is Rwanda a new name in the conversation: it's been used as a repository for unwanted persons by Israel and Denmark for several years.

As the Australian story shows, as if any further evidence were needed, the difference in approach to Ukrainians from Channel-boat migrants is almost entirely about race. The only reason the point isn't more stressed in the media is that it's so widely shared. It's one of our nation's big secrets. But it's one of those secrets that's really a secret to nobody. What's wrong about the Rwanda asylum policy from this point of view is that it's not treating racism as a widespread malaise that the government seeks to eradicate from society; instead it's making racism a fundamental guideline of government policy. That's institutionalised racism if we ever saw it. The painful part is not highlighting the flaw in the policy: it's recognising that the policy is not being promoted because it will work, but because it will be widely popular whether it works or not.

Virtue

And so to a third approach to ethics. This is the ethics of virtue, which turns attention from the making of decisions to the formation of character of those who make those decisions. Virtue ethics locates us in a narrative, or at least highlights the explicit or implicit narratives in which we place ourselves. It turns the question from 'What should our society do?' to 'What kind of a society do we really want to be?', and from 'What should I do?' to 'Of what narratives do I find myself a part?'

Here we begin to move from the utilitarian calculation and slogan-driven name-calling of the first two kinds of ethics to a subtler and more far-reaching understanding of what this conversation is really about. Let's start with narrative. Underlying the Rwanda asylum policy is a notion of the UK's uniqueness. This is an island nation, with different customs from continental Europe. It has obvious and absolute borders. It has every reason and right to control who comes in and out and who belongs. Its dynamism and imagination led it to extend its influence around the world, to partner with a great many countries in ways that brought them Christianity, commerce and civilisation, and left them better off. The partnership with Rwanda is an appropriate updated form of this imperial tradition, where each nation benefits from the relationship. As revealed by the Brexit referendum, the key word in this story is control. The story goes that Britain became great by controlling its resources and limits, and must actively reassert that control so as to Make Britain Great Again.

By contrast the alternative narrative is that Britain as an island is and always has been a nation of migrants. The question is not who's a native and who's a foreigner, but when you or your forebears immigrated. Even more significantly, it's been immigration that's constituted the vibrancy of this country. Over and over again not only has energy and imagination been introduced from elsewhere, but the one from elsewhere becomes regarded as the epitome of Britishness. In this story the immigrant is a source of renewal, and those whose cultures appear to differ the most may take longer to assimilate, but will prove a blessing in the end. The shipping-off of migrants to Rwanda is thus one way this country is cutting off its own source of new life. After all, the rhetoric of Brexit was to cease tying ourselves to Europe and be open to the whole world. Another irony.

These are two rival stories of the past. But there are also rival stories of the future. Story One says control, especially of borders, can be achieved and it will make this country secure and will meanwhile stop the dreadful spectacle of people drowning in the Channel and the North Sea. Story Two is again very different. It says 'What makes you so sure that one day this country won't be the one ruled by a dictatorship or invaded by a foreign power? What makes you so sure you won't be the one in the boat struggling to get across the sea to escape horror and seek a new life in a receptive country? What will you say then if *you're* shipped off to Rwanda?' Story Two is about placing yourself in another's shoes, and turning 'them' into 'we.' In this story you can no longer outsource a problem: because you're potentially outsourcing yourself.

The real question for virtue ethics is what kind of a people we want to be. I recall being stopped at US customs and grilled with lots of questions. I was travelling to give some lectures in Texas. The border guard was unimpressed. 'Aren't there any people in this country who can give those lectures?' he asked, aggressively. 'Apparently not,' I said, beholding how effortlessly he'd just demolished the whole notion of academic enquiry and cultural exchange. But I came away thinking how sad. How sad to try to build a fortress nation that has

nothing to learn or gain from anyone outside, and deals with its problems by paying someone to take them away. How sad to be a country that has no gratitude for how it was formed of people from afar, and no imagination to envisage how its people might themselves one day need to relocate to survive.

This is really the heart of the issue. What kind of people do we want to be? Do we want to be on a boat crossing the Channel, with hope in our heart, believing in a future that's bigger than the past – or do we want to be putting up barricades and fending off marauders, sustaining the fantasy of a past where there were no immigrants and the illusion of a future where we could send all our problems away on a paper aeroplane to a faceless refuse-collection agency?

Alternatives

It won't surprise you to know that virtue ethics is the field I've inhabited these last 30 years. But before I finish there are two other matters I need to attend to. The first is the Home Secretary's insistence that critics of her policy come up with a suitable alternative. Such an endeavour isn't my primary purpose tonight, but I briefly propose three principles on which an alternative may be founded.

First, and most obvious, concentrate on the disease, not the symptom. Most people love their country and its people. Unless for a specific job, they migrate as a last resort. Most who migrate want to return when conditions improve. The great weight of diplomacy and international aid needs to be on keeping people in or as near to their country of origin as possible. The number crossing the sea in boats is minuscule compared to the number displaced but who remain within a few days' journey of their place of origin. That's best for everybody, and policy needs to focus on keeping it that way and making it more so. And foreign policy needs to be primarily about keeping stability and mitigating conditions where people feel they have no alternative but to migrate across continents.

Second, and most challenging to a mindset that seeks to separate the UK from its European neighbours, take collective responsibility. It's childish to say we must receive no refugees because on the map we're the furthest from trouble and they must all stay in France. A mature approach reaches regional international agreements on what percentage of displaced persons each northern European nation is going to receive. To qualify a person only needs to arrive in a country participating in the scheme. So there would be no need for precarious boats across the sea. Compared to such an approach the Rwanda policy looks like a petulant extravagance.

Third, and most subtle, the heart of policy needs to be to empower refugees themselves. Keeping a person in a country when they have little access to benefits and no right to work is the epitome of setting them up to fail. The whole mindset has to change from deterrence, suspicion and punishment to empowerment, support and anticipation of playing a productive and generative role in the economy.

It should go without saying but it's vital to mention that the church cannot be taken seriously when making such proposals unless they reflect its own existing practice. The church is a laboratory of the kingdom and a shop window to society: prophetic calls on the government carry no weight unless the church itself models inclusive welcome and imaginative empowerment.

Theological

And finally, too little too late I hear you say, to the fifth dimension of my response, the theological. The Bible is founded on six journeys, all of which have a bearing on our theme. Jacob and his entourage migrate to Egypt in the midst of famine. This is an economic migration, but really it's a journey of survival. Moses and the children of Israel migrate from Egypt to the Promised Land. They leave as refugees to flee slavery. They take 40 years to reach their destination, and when they get there they face a very hostile environment indeed. Judah loses a battle and is displaced 500 miles to Babylon. There, as Daniel shows, exiles play a vibrant role in public life, and bring unique qualities, represented by the ability to interpret dreams. The exiles finally migrate back to Jerusalem. There you are you see – migrants are generally glad to return home once the danger's passed. But their understanding of God has been transformed from a god who's just concerned with them to a God who's concerned with everybody. Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem. He's living during the occupation by an invading power, Rome. Finally Paul migrates from Jerusalem to Rome. He's searching for legal protection in an empire where citizenship transcends geography.

In short, most of what we'd today call migration is in the Bible, and it's through migration, not in spite of it, that revelation occurs. You could say the greatest migration of all is of Christ from heaven to earth and back. The statement 'Here we have no abiding city' is an announcement that we should consider our whole lives as a season of migration, because we are transiting through Earth to find our true home elsewhere. None of us

straightforwardly belong anywhere, however long our forebears have sojourned there, and none of us abide long on this earth.

Over and again, from Abraham's three visitors to Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, the stranger comes to God's people as a gift. The point of the Good Samaritan parable is not that we should give a little of our bounty to help those by the wayside, but to realise that we are the one in the gutter and Jesus comes to us in the form of a stranger, perhaps one we despised or thought was an enemy. Of course the current pattern of migration is a challenge, but in theological terms it's a challenge to be received not as a problem to be fixed but as an opportunity to be received as a gift. By the way we receive this challenge the Christian community demonstrates who we realise we are and who we believe God is. We are strangers and pilgrims on earth, and God is the one who comes to us like one unknown. He was in the world, but the world received him not. Lord, have mercy upon us.