

**Review of Richard Vernon, *Friends, Citizens, Strangers: Essays on Where We Belong* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005)**

Charles Blattberg  
(Université de Montréal)

“Should we put locality before citizenship, citizenship before human obligations?” This is the central question animating Richard Vernon’s fascinating book. He defines the three sorts of relationship it invokes as follows. Ties of friendship “arise from the particular and local character of our lives, lived as, clearly they must be, in particular local contexts”; ties of citizenship come “from sharing political space, from common subjection to law, and from participation in institutions and processes through which consent to political authority is generated”; and ties among strangers exist “among those who are ‘only humans’, categorically but not concretely related to us” (pp. 3–4). Vernon considers all three relationships important, which is why we need to face “the question of priority of attachment.” He himself does so through an investigation of citizenship, one that he pursues in two ways. First, via a number of fascinating chapters – all of them models of scholarship in the history of political ideas – that examine how the question was dealt with by eight writers, four English (Locke, Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, and Mill) and four French (Rousseau, Comte, Proudhon, Bergson). Vernon suggests that, for historical reasons, the question has been particularly pronounced in these two countries, though I must say that I can’t think of one in which it has not. Regardless, he then deals with it more directly, in chapters focused on the idea of crimes against humanity and on the very notion of special ties and what they imply we owe each other. Finally, in the book’s concluding chapter, he offers us an outline of his own answer to the question (more on it below).

If I have any doubts here, it is with Vernon’s assumption that the question is capable of a single answer. For how could “we” – by which he means everyone – ever come to an agreement on it given the many differences between us as well as the diverse situations we face? Isn’t it right to expect that some, given who they are and their particular contexts, will put their local ties before those of their citizenship, while others will do the opposite, including as regards how they prioritize their obligations to foreigners? It seems to me that, if it is to be taken seriously, Vernon’s question should not be faced in the abstract, but rather when it emerges from the context of specific conflicts. And to answer it, those involved need to engage in dialogue, which is to say politics.

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Vernon, however, would reject this particularist approach, since he favours one that involves applying a theory of justice. And while I'm obviously not keen on such theories myself, I can't go along with those, such as Martin Heidegger and Richard Rorty, for whom questions like Vernon's are bad because "metaphysical." On the contrary, it seems to me that, sometimes at least, the theorizing they inspire can be very creative. Indeed, Vernon's book is a case in point, since the answer it gives strikes me as an intriguing one: essentially, Vernon wants us to invoke the idea of subsidiarity and so to appreciate that while we ought to begin by affirming universal rights, we must also accept that the entitlements associated with them should be increasingly waved as we advance towards closer, more personal relationships. Otherwise, they will surely be undermined.

I doubt that this (or any other such) theory can serve to protect those relationships in practice, however. Still, it seems to me that Vernon has developed a genuinely original approach, one that everyone who thinks about justice would benefit from considering.