The mandate to love the neighbor as oneself presumes that the neighbor has been properly identified. How can one love the neighbor as oneself? This is the ultimate goal and this essay will suggest that virtue theory has unique methodological advantages over moral naturalism, utilitarianism and deontological rational universalism.

Summary statement at beginning: This present essay will argue that of the three broadly recognized methods of moral reasoning—deontological, utilitarian and virtue—the latter offers perspectives on both moral agents and subjects that avoids abstract universalism or misplaced virtue ethics is uniquely positioned to help us attend to the matters of not only the identification of the neighbor but how moral agents might successfully attend to the needs of the neighbor.

The essay will suggest that of the three major ethical traditions that are available to us—deontological rational universal duty-based ethics or utilitarian, and virtue—more than the other two virtue ethics can bring together in a methodically satisfying way issue of identification of the neighbor and questions of subsequent action. This perspective will have particular relevance as we seek ways in which the Leviticus text raises ethical issues for the modern world.

The religious lawyer who was intently concerned about his fate in the afterlife asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Knowing that they shared a common religious heritage, Jesus reminded the man of an ancient maxim in the book of Leviticus: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” (19: 18, 33-34) But the lawyer, being alert and schooled in matters of arguments, asked a perfectly reasonable question: “who is my neighbor?”

Ultimately, Christian ethics must push the lawyer’s question to its ultimate conclusion. The identity of the neighbor is logically prior to all proposed actions toward the neighbor. How can we assess the adequacy of actions oriented toward the neighbor apart from some knowledge of the identity of the neighbor, the neighbor’s needs, her conditions or his overall life circumstances? On what basis can we gauge the moral worth of such actions until we have in mind a clear and compelling picture of the one toward whom the actions are taken? Until the identity of the neighbor is attended to with care,
then questions about strategies relative to action toward the neighbor are apt to end in vacuous abstractions or inconsequential reflections.

For much of human history, questions relative to the identity of the neighbor were considered within the demands of blood ties, the familiar boundaries of commonly shared cultural traditions or the tight confines of geographical proximity. Perhaps owing to the challenge of ensuring group survival and strategic demands to maintain group security, mistrust of the stranger came to occupy a central place in the evolution of human group consciousness. From a perspective of evolutionary biology, xenophobia would come to serve a positive good. The neighbor could never be considered anyone beyond the bonds of kith, kin or commonly held tradition. Outside of this context the very notion of the term “neighbor” would have no meaning whatsoever.

Moral naturalism would suggest that no one outside of the strict confines of blood ties can be legitimately considered a neighbor and treated with such respect. Persuaded that such sensibilities still lay deep within the psyche of modern humans, Sigmund Freud, in his Civilization and Its Discontents, articulated his unqualified disdain for the Leviticus 19:18 text. Sensing that a conflict between archaic realities of natural aggression within the human psyche and the inability of humans to fulfill an ideal command such as loving the neighbor as oneself, Freud proposed that we “take a naïve attitude towards it, as if we were meeting it for the first time. Thereupon we find ourselves unable to suppress a feeling of astonishment, as at something unnatural.” (my italics) He then went to put a series of questions to the text:

Why should we do this” What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How could it possibly be done? My love seems to me a valuable thing that I have no right to throw away without reflection. It imposes obligations on me which I must be prepared to make sacrifices to fulfill. If I love someone, he must be worthy of it in some way or other. He will be worthy of it if he is so like me in important respects that I can love myself in him; worthy of it if he is so much more perfect than I that I can love my ideal of myself in him; I must love him if he is the son of my friend, since the pain my friend would feel if anything untoward happened to him would be my pain—I should have to share it.1 (81-82)

So far, we can assume that Freud’s rather dim outlook on the viability of neighbor-love presupposes a situation in which people know one another. But things become even more dire when this neighbor is a perfect stranger:

But if he is a stranger to me and cannot attract me by any value he has in himself or any significance he may have already acquired in my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him. I shall even be doing wrong if I do, for my love is valued is valued as a privilege by all those belonging to me; it is an injustice to them if I put a stranger on a level with them.2
Freud becomes even more strident in his denunciation of love for this putative neighbor. “Not merely is this stranger in general unworthy of my love,” Freud writes:

I must honestly confess he has more claim to my hostility, even to my hatred. He does not seem to have the least trace of love for me, does not show me the slightest consideration. If it will do him any good, he has no hesitation in injuring me, never even asking himself whether the amount of advantage he gains by it bears any proportion to the amount of wrong done to me. Indeed, he need not even obtain an advantage; if he can satisfy any sort of desire by it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me and showing his superior power; and the more secure he feels and the more helpless I am, the more certainly I can expect him to behave like this to me. (again, find exact page)

Freud went on to justify his contempt for this injunction and its corollary on loving one’s enemies on his presumption that humans were not angels and that “men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. The result is that their neighbor is to them not only a possible helper of sexual object, but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. Homo homini lupus; who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history? (85)

Continuing, Freud says: “The existence of this tendency to aggression which we can detect in ourselves and rightly presume to be present in others is the factor that disturbs our relations with out neighbors and makes it necessary for culture to institute its high demands. Civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another. Their interests in their common work would not hold them together; the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests. (86)

Freud’s use of what he calls, “naivete” has a valid methodological use in that in the quest for scientific objectivity it “brackets” out all presuppositions and values that that might conceivably undermine such objectivity. Such values and presuppositions would be attendant to the overall human enterprise known as “civilization,” the very enterprise that, in Freud’s view, suppresses all that is primal, and by implication, valid. Yet, the strength of the method is paradoxically the source of its weakness. Freud’s naivete betrays a perspective that resists moral tutoring or enhancement of moral reasoning. For Freud, the basis for moral reasoning is a function of that which is deemed natural and unalloyed. What one ought to do is founded on what is. Practically speaking, for Freud and all moral naturalists of his ilk, nobody can become the neighbor unless they meet the criteria set up by the moral agent.
Freed’s “naivete” betrays moral egoism and a sense of the untutored moral self. Freud’s assessment of the human condition is one which presumes an unalloyed human nature, one that has not gone through the historical—by his judgment—artificial—process of refinement. Indeed, civilization—the ultimate embodiment of attempts at human refinement—presents a dubious gift to humanity. The most apparent problem with the kind of moral naturalism that Freud evinces is that ultimately the human condition devolves to a primal rule of sheer force. Indeed as a commentator on Freud’s observations has noted it is a condition of homo homini lupus—man the predator of man.

Thus for Freud—and implicitly for moral naturalism—human beings are in essence predators of each other—homo homini lupus—hardly the kinds of creatures who see in each other the makings of the neighbor. This has been the case for many years and aeons. This will help explain Sigmund Freud’s reluctance to accord any sense of love or regard to persons who were not known by the person as a neighbor And perhaps a naturalistic ethic would preclude the neighbor from being anyone else outside of one’s own ethnic group. So, a purely naturalistic ethic would mandate that no one outside of the group could be regarded as neighbor, worthy of love and moral regard. Clearly, the prospects for cultivating a regard for the neighbor are rather dismal within the view of the human condition as proposed by Sigmund Freud.

No stranger to the mysterious realm of human consciousness that underlay pretensions to ethical assertion While Freud’s “naivete” might have had a methodological usefulness, one that disposed the investigator to openness, it betrayed a consciousness that is not unlike that of being morally untutored. It is that of primitive human without any of the trappings of civilization, which ironically is the concern of much of his book. Indeed, as the introduction continues, “Freud brings his reflections on neighbor-love to a provisional conclusion by appealing to the persistence, in human beings, of a fundamental inclination toward aggression, a primary mutual hostility. As “creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness,…their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him, Homo homini lupus.” (Freud, 66-69)

Naivete and “hearing it for the first time” indicates a level of moral reflection that does have the benefit of reflection. At this point moral reflection seeks to refine a rather “natural” ethical response to the issue of the neighbor.

The “moral naturalism” that I have argued lay behind his rejection of the Levitical moral code can, on one level, seem perfectly just and allowable to many people. Naturalism as a moral perspective holds that what humans ought to do can be inferred quite legitimately from who they are. And, of course, moral naturalists such as Freed would argue that human naturally seek pleasure, naturally seek to ward off aggressors even as they themselves may evidence aggression in the pursuit of desirable goods. The world of homo homini lupus is a real world of tooth and claw, blood and aggression.
Still, other claims from other ethical perspectives will challenge such a view and put forth the suggestion that at bottom human beings are motivated other motives. In a very real sense, counter perspectives to naturalism, whether utilitarianism, or Kantian universalism, certainly Christian theocentric ethics, put forward the claim that visions of what humans ought to do may be put forward, based on visions of human nature. For utilitarians, a vision of human nature would still affirm humans as seekers of pleasure but would ultimately transfer the proof of ethical acts to the collective good rather than individuals.

For the Kantian universalist, the proof of any moral maxim would be whether rational beings would recognize the validity of the maxim on some universal level.

Freud’s view of the human condition is obviously anathema to any moral theorists who resist the inadequacy of moral naturalism. Again, with respect to loving the neighbor, moral naturalism would judge the whole enterprise to be suspect. The prospect of loving the neighbor is based on the level of reciprocity established with the one doing the loving. The identity thus of the neighbor is perforce clouded by the neighbor’s ability to live up to the expectations of the one doing the loving.

Neighbor-love is limited within the theory of moral naturalism. Neighbor-love is bounded by the realities of blood or, correspondingly, it is given probability based on the lessoning of any threat to the one doing the loving. There is no possibility for empathy, a basic orientation toward others that could possibly eventuate in neighbor-love.

Utilitarianism:

Obviously, for an ethical perspective to yield a perspective that would ensure the identification of the neighbor and then go on the proscribe behavior toward that neighbor, then a way must be found to justify orientation toward the neighbor. Utilitarianism does that by positing the pleasure principle, but going beyond Freud and suggesting that the pleasure principle theoretically ought be enjoyed by the greatest number of persons in a society. For utilitarians of the variety of John Stuart Mill, all other humans beings would be potential neighbors. (For Jeremy Bentham, animals would be considered also in such a light.)

Hedonism is still the major characteristic for utilitarians. The ultimate good for human beings is happiness. Therefore the ultimate good for human society would be those acts that brings the greatest level of happiness for the greatest number of persons. Theoretically, all human beings within human society are neighbors, and the level of morality attached to every act will be measured by whether such an act would redound to the happiness of the rest of the members of society. The greatest good for the greatest number of persons becomes the norm by which human actions will be measured.
“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” (find this page for this quote)

Now one thing is certain with utilitarianism: The ultimate measure for morality has nothing necessarily with personal relations; the utilitarian standard is a social standard that transcends individual or even personal relations. One treats the neighborly is a good and right way not so much for what it does for the neighbor but rather in proportion to how the wider society might be affected.

“What is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned.” (find this quote)

With utilitarianism, neighbor-love is facilitated to the extent that the overall happiness for everyone else can be facilitated. But in this case the neighbor is in fact used as a means for calculating the overall happiness of everybody else. The neighbor as object—on one hand a positive value is good since one does all manner of good things for the neighbor. Yet, paradoxically, the neighbor is still an object, a very valuable means by which one might judge if the happiness of others has been achieved. And, to be sure, this might be a good and laudable thing, inasmuch as good things will be done for persons in society—but still one has the nagging suspicion that much paternalism could be in the offing.

A few observations about the neighbor and love of neighbor from the naturalist-utilitarian perspective are in order. For one thing, the calculus for determining the worth of the neighbor and what is owed the neighbor is always determined by what is of value to the moral agent. Nothing outside of that nexus can aid or detract from the value of the neighbor. But what if the values of the agent become so constricted and so narrow that no one outside of the worldview of the agent can be considered a viable candidate to be a neighbor. The implication of the utilitarian perspective is that only those who can succeed in satisfying the criteria for fulfilling value to the moral self can be accorded the status of neighbor. But what will this mean for human relations? Well, for thing it will mean that such relations will be perforce rather limited—this helps explain why most cultures have been xenophobic and closed-off, suspicious and fearful of the stranger. Outside of the familiar and the clan, the traditional context for community relations among human beings, “nobody” can become the neighbor.

With naturalism, there is a kind of untutored moral sensibility, if you will. The natural urges will dictate any ethical consciousness of sensibility. In a very real sense, utilitarianism is a refined basis of hedonism—a celebration of the pleasure principle. Relate this to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. With this philosophy, neighbor regard will depend on the degree to which one’s happiness is enhanced or diminished. Even the most enlightened utilitarian—one who would say be concerned that the less fortunate have housing—would based that judgment on the hoped for overall happiness of the entire society.
The key would be to show the advantages and disadvantages of utilitarianism,
Who is the other? Is the other reduced to an object?
Utilitarianism would indeed do good things for the neighbor, but it always runs the risk of
reducing the neighbor to merely one of the factors in the systems of decisions aimed at
doing the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. In other words, the neighbor
becomes reduced to cog in the wheel.

The option of Kantian universalism

A deontological posture is inherently critical of the utilitarian perspective. The
deontologist would charge that despite the utilitarian pretension to objectivity, some
subjectivity must be smuggled into the process of calculating, even of assigning some
objective correlate to subjective judgments. Thus the deontologist seeks to frame the
issue differently and on some universal ground.

Or the ethical response could take a route of universalism based on a Kantian
deontological approach. This would be an ethic grounded in the categorical imperative by
which all rational agents must in fact love the neighbor. Who would the neighbor be? She
would be, without exception, everyone. All rational agents would perforce have to make
this judgment for Kant. There can be no exceptions. See what Kant has to say about the
neighbor. With the universalist turn, the calculus for assigning the identity and who is
owed the neighbor is couched in a universal rationalism. One must ultimately despair in
every getting any clues as to what must be done for any particular person within this
rationalist and universalist point of view.

The other perspective that seems to be rejected is moral universalism. A universal
Kantian model might seem to hold possibilities. Love everyone; but the problem here is
who is everyone? How can we encounter them? What do they look like? With universal
rationalism, everybody of everyone is considered the critical moral agent. But what is
plaguing universal rationalism is the inability to envision any one person who is a real
agent. The agent is granted regard only because of membership is a vast universal pot—
but there is little chance of the individual traits being perceived and appreciated.

With the universalist, access to rationality becomes the way by which all persons,
“everybody” becomes the neighbor. The problem here is that unless there is a specific
human being, a tangible being that can be juxtaposed to this “everybody” then the
everybody will forever remain a vacuous abstraction. I could use Levinas here to critique
Enlightenment rationality and universalism. Universalism simply cannot fathom the
particularities that might be encountered by people.

Joseph Butler’s notion of the confluence between self-interest and beneficence or
Being itself. Ultimately, for Butler it would amount to love of neighbor being a
touchstone as to how much virtue of beneficence is shown by the individual. I think this
is true; check it out.
Here again one might do good things for the neighbor, but there is no particularity with which one goes about the process of interacting with the neighbor. All neighbors devolve into a large blob.

A number of things are simply wrong with utilitarian and Kantian universalist ways of interacting with the neighbor. In the first place, insofar as both seek to focus on the other Thus it is in vain that we can depend upon either utilitarian ethics or Kantian universalism to point us toward the neighbor. The pitfalls are simply too great to rely on these perspectives to point the way. On one hand we risk exploiting the very one for one laudable acts are done, since we will always judge those acts according to a calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number of persons. On the other hand, we risk losing the particular and specific reasons for our neighborly acts when the rationale for such action is grounded in abstract universalism; we end up with a directive to do the same thing for everyone; or a directive to treat everyone in the exactly the same way, with no room for excepts or sensitivity to the peculiar needs of any one neighbor.

Virtue oriented ethics would focus on becoming the neighbor. Matter of fact, Jesus’ counter-question to the neighbor suggests that focus ought to be on developing the personal traits such that one would be in a position to be the neighbor for anybody who came along—being able to be neighborly and able to meet the particularity of everyone who just might be in need.

But how do we get there?

**What will be needed however is a theological assertion that God has created everybody and a pledge to develop my own internal traits such I will be ready to be the neighbor for them. This is essence is the foundation for a virtue-oriented approach to the neighbor question.**

**The option of virtue-oriented ethics**

Virtue ethics offers a perspective on the neighbor that avoids the emptiness of Kantian universalism and the narrowness of calculating utilitarianism by determining the identity and duties toward the neighbor based on assessments of the development of virtues and the extent of moral formation with the moral agent. At a purely theoretical level, virtue ethics has much to commend itself insofar as it is applicable to our problem of identifying the neighbor and identifying what must be done toward the neighbor. A virtue oriented approach would couch the approach in the kind of person we are called to be. It would go inward. The question would then become: how does the virtue-oriented person view the other, this other person who is before me? How does virtue help us uncover the identify of the neighbor?
Levinas and the Other.

Alasdair MacIntyre, “virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular way, but also to feel in particular ways.” (After Virtue, 149.)

The focus must be becoming the neighbor. Even Augustine recognized this. In commenting of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Augustine wrote: “For the word ‘neighbor’ implies a relationship: one can only be a neighbor to a neighbor. Who can fail to see that there is no exception to this, nobody to whom compassion is not due? (St. Augustine, On Christian Teaching 1.31, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Augustine offers the following picture of his vision of love in action:

All people should be loved equally. But you cannot do good to all people equally, so you should take particular thought for those who, as if by lot, happen to be particularly close to you in terms of place, time, or any other circumstances. Suppose that you had plenty of something which had to be given to someone in need of it but could not be given to two people, and you met two people, neither of whom had a greater need or a closer relationship to you than the other: you could do nothing more just than to choose by lot the person to whom you should give what could not be given to both. Analogously, since you cannot take thought for all men, you must settle (rather than by lot) in favor of the one who happens to be more closely associated with you in temporal matters. (Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.28.29).

Augustine’s words, “as if by lot,” and “one who happens to be more closely associated” are meant to convey the challenge of discerning how one acts within the realities of space and time and the real contexts of life. It is an attempt to apply some measure of equanimity under difficult and challenging circumstances.

And to be sure, there is no surefire method or strategy by which one shows perfect love to the neighbor. It is as if one has to work at it:

Would that it were as easy to do something for one’s neighbor’s good or to avoid injuring him as it is for the kind-hearted and well-instructed individual to love him. But here good will alone does not suffice, for it is a work demanding great understanding and prudence. (Augustine, On the Morals of the Catholic Church, 1.26.51)

Virtue ethics turns the issue away from calculating what we must do 1) either to show that we have really loved the neighbor by way of either utilitarian calculation or universal Kantian perspective, but rather on who we have become. Ian A. McFarland, “As it turns out, “neighbor” is not a category that the lawyer is authorized to apply to others; instead, it takes the form of a challenge and recoils back upon him as a moral agent capable either of being or of failing to be a neighbor to someone else.” (Ian A. MacFarland, “Who Is My Neighbor?” Modern Theology 17:1 January 2001, 60; see also J. M. Creed, The...
The neighbor as a unique other—not a prescription for abstract equality; equality becomes quite beside the point, because conditions will vary. Social station will vary; but it really doesn’t matter.

Virtue theorists accentuate our place in time and space. They seek to avoid the vacuous abstractions of universalism and the overly calculating attitude of utilitarianism. John Milbank regards the love shown by the Good Samaritan as “precisely a preferential love for those nearest to us, those with the most inherited, realized and developed affinity with us, as well as those strangers with whom suddenly we are bonded whether we like it or not, by instances of distress, shared experiences or preferred comfort.” (John Milbank, Being Reconciled (New York: Routledge, 2003), 39.

I would argue that by focusing on the particular and by preparing our dispositions to be neighborly the universal goal of showing neighborliness is made manifest and concrete in the particular.

The practice of virtue requires a careful assessment of the interactions that will form the basis—indeed the laboratory—for the cultivation of the virtues. The virtues can never be cultivated in the abstract. What is required is always an Other, another person with whom one can “practice” as it were. All the virtues have at bottom a force field of action in which certain critical “others” are required. How can one display courage without strenuous interaction with others, or prudence, or temperance or justice? These virtues are never merely abstractions: they require the presence of others by which the virtues can be honed and sharpened.

It must always be remembered that virtue is always about moral excellence. And even for Aristotle, moral excellence must be cultivated by showing a requisite amount of prudence at the right time, in the right proportion, etc. This will mean that virtue is always mindful of the particularity of the circumstances in which virtue is to be manifested. It can never be properly manifested in a purely abstract way, as is the challenge facing the universalist.

If a Christian, then I must presume that God has created me and therefore I must logically also presume that God has created everybody else. But I must recognize the difference between each and each one of us. The virtue oriented person would therefore seek to claim “anybody” as neighbor, rather than a universalistic “everybody.”
A doctrine of creation and recognition of our creation by God necessarily points to an anthropology that could undergird a notion of the neighbor. This would be a view of ourselves is missed by both naturalism and universalism.

The Leviticus text joins the injunction to love the neighbor as one loves oneself with an affirmation that God is Lord. This injunction and affirmation might form the basis for any Christian ethical approach to the meaning of the passage. Such an affirmation must take into radical consideration the fact that God has created every human, and as such every human being is my neighbor.

If we note our differences and still retain relentlessly the fact that God has made us we must come to the conclusion that God has made each uniquely.

One other things that commends virtue ethics: Unlike utilitarianism that focuses on the agent as useful for the enhancement of pleasure, or the universal rationalist who gives regard to the agent only to the extent that they belong some abstract universal pot, virtue ethics will focus on themselves. Since with virtue ethics the agent could be “anybody” the onus is on the person to so cultivate themselves that they would be ready to engage the agent in a meaningful encounter. “I must be ready.”

For virtue theorists who would appropriate Christian faith, it would be the confluence of three factors: an affirmation about our nature, an affirmation about what God has done as Creator, and an affirmation about the all others with whom I will come in contact. All three—when held close together—will eventuate in the unique perspective that comes from Christian virtue ethics. This perspective affirms that God must be recognized as Creator, that in creating the other as oneself, the other must respected as such. Ultimately, one must affirm this from the depths of one’s being; it becomes a part of you.

Kierkegaard: “He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God.” (Provocations, 99).

Kierkegaard goes on to say elsewhere: “Since your neighbor is unconditionally every person, all distinctions are indeed removed from the object.”

As Gilbert Meilaender puts it in quoting Soren Kierkegaard: To find a friend is no easy task. It requires consideration of the other’s character, his interests, his abilities—literally, almost everything that make the friend the particular person he is. On the other hand, “there is in the whole world not a single person who can be recognized with such ease and certainty as one’s neighbor. You can never confuse him with anyone else, for indeed all men are your neighbor.” Kierkegaard, Works of Love, pp. 64ff: What has Kierkegaard done here?

K goes on to suggest a link between friendship and neighbor-love: “If you save a man’s life in the dark, supposing him to be your friend, but he is your neighbor, this again is no mistake.” (65) It is no mistake because when we are speaking of neighbor-love, of “friendship to all the world,” it really makes no difference.
So….apparently, K is able to fashion a notion of neighbor-love that is co-extensive with friendship: “in the dark,” so to speak, they are both the same. But I wonder, as does Meilaender. In a note Meilaender writes: “One loves each neighbor in all his or her particularity, but loves nonpreferentially. I must confess, however, that I have never been able to understand how such neighbor-love could incorporate into its commitment any elements of philia or eros. The essential Kierkegaard seems to me to be the one who uproots all preferential loves. If that is correct, he eliminates rather than solves the problem with which this chapter deals.” (go back and state clearly what Meilaender’s chapter was about).

Meilaender (p. 33): “Such a love, because it seeks its own no more than Christ did, breaks through all the normal forms of life in society. Free of all claims to power, privilege, and possession—free even of all desires except the one overmastering desire to follow Christ—this type of Christian lover goes out in search of his neighbor. He seeks no particular goal, not even that of fellowship with the neighbor. He seeks only to make the way of Christ his own and may be quite certain that this way is likely to lead to a cross. This is an agape which cuts through and “transvalues” all the partial loves and attachments of our lives. It serves the neighbor—any neighbor—by refusing to make its own claims or seek fulfillment of its own desires.”

The kind of person we are. We should seek to become the kind of person who can encounter “anybody” with all of their uniqueness (as opposed to merely chanting a celebration of universalism or everybody or obviously of settling for “nobody” outside of our utilitarian framework.

If I have succeeded in moral formation then my attention has never been on the neighbor per se at all. It is not like I am trying to get perfect for this neighbor or that neighbor: I simply want to get ready to be a neighbor “to anyone.” So it comes about that after becoming aware of the Other—I focus on who I am so that I will better be able to really be available for “anyone.”

Confronting the other—each one is an other to another.

Neighbor is what neighbor can claim upon me.

Now, having affirmed that the parable of the Good Samaritan seems to steer between naturalism and universalism ultimately moving us to a kind of Christian particularism, how can these claims be given theological and ethical warrants? On what theo-ethical grounding can we proceed with confidence to determine who the neighbor is and what might be our duties toward the neighbor? What does it mean for anyone, anybody, any other living human being to be my neighbor and hence be worthy of the love that I would lavish upon myself? Such a question is necessarily put to us if we take Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan at its face value and begin to ponder the meaning of
loving our neighbor as ourselves. The neighbor is everybody else and we must love them as we love ourselves.

What happens when we steer between naturalistic particularism and a vacuous universalism?

One answer to this problem would be to ask ourselves what happens when we push the logical extension of freeing the neighbor from conventional limitations of ethnicity and communal familiarity and loving of neighbor as we love ourselves? If we presume—as we must—that God is to be regarded as the creator of ourselves and every neighbor that we will possibly encounter, and if we presume that a priority must always be preserved to the action and agency of God rather than to purely human motives and desires, then we are forced to establish a notion of the neighbor that is necessarily posited in what God has done in creating each of us. God has created all persons to be—in fact—the neighbor that we have simply not encountered yet. Based on this theological turn, we move the fulcrum for identifying the neighbor from one couched purely in human terms to one decided by divine agency.

There inevitably will emerge a distinction between “anybody” and “everybody.” Everybody is an abstraction in which specific humans are submerged under a broad universal abstraction. With “anybody,” however, a specific person is yet to emerge and indeed may and does have the potential of emerging to confront me. This confrontation and the dynamics of that encounter—how I define it—is beyond my control.

The identification of the neighbor is swallowed up into a kind of anonymity—we can no longer assign to the neighbor categories that fit our own narrowly defined means of identifying who the neighbor. Historically we have done this—usually reserving the identity of neighbor to those we know as kindred or as familiar participants in our activities. Yet neither can we associate the neighbor with a kind of rational universalism. Here “everyone” is the neighbor but a moral requirement to love particular neighbors is absent.

With virtue theory we are inevitably thrown back onto a situationalist turn. We must prepare for any eventuality. Moreover, we must try and anticipate what we would be called to do in the eventuality that anybody would show up as the neighbor.

**Yet to be disclosed: anybody is and can be disclosed to be the neighbor.** We just never know.

We are enjoined to love “anybody” as neighbor.

Clement’s First Letter: #38: “Following this out, we must preserve our Christian body in its entirety. Each must be subject to his neighbor.”
What does this notion of anonymity tell us? What is the notion that “anyone could be our neighbor” trying to tell us? The identity of the neighbor must now be grounded in what God has done in making us who we are. It is divine prerogative and divine action that we are acknowledging when we affirm that anyone could be our neighbor. Surely under this rubric no identification of the neighbor is a result of our own calculation.

We can never calculate, either by universalistic and rationalist calculus, nor by a utilitarian practical calculus who the neighbor might be. We just never know, just as the Samaritan could not calculate who, or when he would encounter the neighbor. A radical appreciation of what God has done will prevent any uniquely human calculus from being used.

Thus it is that our anthropology—the way God has made us within God’s creative act—that is now determinant as to how we identify all human beings as our neighbor. It is precisely because of this observation that Levinas and others can put so much store in the other—the Face of the other—because all of our faces are within this vast sea of anonymity that we have just identified. Our ability to see the other could not even be a possibility were it not for the creative power of God already manifested in creating each one of us.

The remainder of the essay will seek to use ethical and theological observations in an effort to lay bare the meaning of exactly who is our neighbor and exactly what kinds of ethical actions are then enjoined upon us. I hold that only from such a designation will come a mandate as to what we are called to do with respect to the neighbor. The essay will argue that a not only can a minimalist understanding of the neighbor not be justified, but that it goes against the very notion of ethics itself, that it is metaphysically at variance with the meaning of what it means to be ethical. This can be seen in classical contexts, in Augustine, in Levinas and in contemporary Christian ethics as well, notably in the thinking of notable figures.

The work of Levinas might be helpful here. Retrieve the piece I did for the Progressive Baptists on the “other.” Alterity and the thinking of Levinas. Nothing ethically speaking, nor indeed, in art, speech and any other cultural endeavor is likely to ensue until we have encountered the “Other.” There are no universals that we simply perceive as being “out there.” The first part of the essay should seek to establish the nub of ethical consciousness. I hold that the consciousness is a distinction between the is and the ought. I can bring in other classical thinkers to establish this point. But once we establish this distinction between the is and the ought we will not be far from recognizing the importance of the other.

All problems and questions attendant to the notion of ethical consciousness must—of necessity—point beyond the individual moral agent. It is impossible to be ethical and not attend to matters that concern the other, the one we recognize as the neighbor.
All the classical virtues presume some level of obligatory regard for the other, the neighbor. After all, how can prudence ever be tested apart from a judgment as to how putative actions will affect others? How is courage ever to be measured unless we judge one’s willingness to risk a life for country, tribe—other persons who in fact constitute these abstract notions?

Even classical, that is to say, early Greek notions of virtue formation must attend to some matter of notion of the other. This might hold true except for hedonism and the philosophy of Epicurus.

Another question would be: Who am I obligated to treat as neighbor, and what am I obligated to do for, with, and to this neighbor?

There comes a point when we make a distinction between friend and neighbor—couched in the universal. After all, we must unabashedly admit that not all potential neighbors can be our friends: friends require some degree of preferential treatment and the benefits of relationships. But—as we have already discerned—those persons out there who will be counted our neighbor cannot be so circumscribed or limited: their merit as our neighbor lies quite beyond anything that we can do with respect to designating them as neighbor: they simply are neighbor because God has put them there as neighbor.

Any other Christian ethical thinkers.

Then, suggest what a globalized context would suggest should go into a meaning of neighbor.

Finally, with a new definition of neighbor under my belt, I should then be in a position to suggest how I ought act with respect to the ones I now regard as neighbor.

Thoughts and sequence of argument:

Naturalism—at least the model offered by Sigmund Freud—precludes seeing anyone other than my fellow clan member as neighbor. I determine who is worthy to be considered a neighbor.

Utilitarianism is in fact a variant of this kind of thinking: my ethical judgment with respect to anybody else will be made whether they advance my happiness of the happiness of society in general.

Act only on that maxim which you would at the same time will that it should be a universal rule. Any regard shown toward any putative neighbor should be so extended without exception—just as one would withhold from lying or stealing—without exception. In this rational universalism, all rational agents must accede to this demand and perform this duty, without exception.
Rational universalism cannot recognize particularity nor can it be swayed by particular reasons that would be offered to love this neighbor or that neighbor. Indeed, were I to be swayed by such considerations, I would violate one of the cardinal principles of deontological ethics: I must do this act not out of inclination or feeling but duty based on rational argument. So—no one person can be identified as neighbor.

A way must be found to mandate that I love everybody but do so out of a recognition of their particularity. And a way is found by putting virtue ethics and Christian theocentric considerations together. Two things happen when these two principles are brought together: a focus is put on the developing moral formation of the agent, always growing, always being formed—in response to what God has done—in creating all these other fellow creatures, a feat that by definition must be recognized as something that God has done, and not me.

Hence, attending to the formation of the virtues, will in essence get ready to attend to the needs of “anybody” who might present themselves to me as neighbor. I must be ready to attend to the particularity of their needs, contexts, and requirements, just as the Good Samaritan did.

A criterion for virtue ethics is human flourishing—it is the single criterion of the good for virtue ethics.

Aristotle says at one point in the NE: One may also observe in one’s travels to distant countries the feelings of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being. 1155a21-22

Kierkegaard says at one point: “Erotic love is determined by the object; friendship is determined by the object; only love to one’s neighbor is determined by love. Since one’s neighbor is every man, unconditionally every man, all distinctions are indeed removed from the object.

Proof from the parable that becoming the neighbor is what Jesus had in mind. Ultimately, at the end of the parable, the neighbor is not necessarily defined as the one in need, but the one who showed neighborliness. This is not merely a logical slight-of-hand. A lot is at stake: either we can continue to invest our energies into defining more precisely who deserves the status of neighbor, or who best comports with an individual manifestation of a universal dictum to treat all persons as neighbor, or we can invest our energies in developing the requisite virtues, traits of character, predispositions such that we will, indeed—act as the neighbor.

Since the focus is now on the person—in context—we therefore have a more realistic foundation on which to judge the adequacy of moral acts. As Augustine has suggested, there is nothing wrong with treating those clearly situated closer to you in a more intensely loving way, and then so on as the circle of my relationships widen. After all, I
am situated in some real life situations and these situations must be given some degree of importance. See John Milbank, Alasdair McIntyre, etc for this perspective. But, being grounded in my context does not inure me from an attitude of responsiveness to those in need; it does not prevent me from having a predisposition toward others, and this will be proven whenever I come into contact with them. I will use my best judgment as to what I can do when a homeless person asks for a handout.

2 Ibid.