

JOHN TIRMAN: So we're going to begin. I'm John Tirman. Welcome to this session on philosophy. Why is there philosophy at the Center for International Studies? Well, we'll find out. On behalf of the center, welcome. Our co-sponsors are the MIT Bookstore, MIT Department of Linguistics and Philosophy. And I want to remind you that there are books of Anat's book for sale out near the food.

In typical format, today's event will conclude with a Q&A. And we want you to ask one brief question, or briefly stated. And use a microphone, because we are recording this session. So just be mindful of that.

It's an honor today to welcome our longtime friend and colleague, Anat Biletzki, to discuss her new book, *Philosophy of Human Rights, a Systematic Introduction*. Not just any introduction, it's a systematic introduction. So that's going to be special.

She is the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Philosophy at Quinnipiac University. She's a research affiliate here at the center. And she is co-director of the Human Rights and Technology Fellowship Program. Her publications include *Talking Wolves*, *Thomas Hobbs on the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language* and *(Over)Interpreting Wittgenstein*. Did I say that correctly? Wittgenstein. She served as chairperson of B'tzelem the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories from 2001 to 2006, and was nominated among the 1,000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

She'll be followed by two discussants. The first is our own Sally Haslanger, Ford Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, and Serena Parekh, Associate Professor of Philosophy and director of the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics Program at Northeastern University. And last, but not least, moderating the discussion will be Ken Oye, who is Professor of Political Science here at MIT and Professor of Data Systems and Society in the School of Engineering, director of the program on Emerging Technologies.

So that's a lot to take in. And again, we'll have Q&A after. And we'll begin with Anat.

[APPLAUSE]

ANAT BILETZKI: Hello, thank you. It's so wonderful to be here. I first came to MIT in general, and CIS, in particular, which was so out of line for anyone doing philosophy, at least in those years-- many

years ago-- to work on human rights. And John has been with me, or I've been with him, and Michel, and other people, and Ken-- people who have been working with, ever since. And particularly, on human rights. So it's been a smooth trajectory all along.

And in that sense, this book is a finale-- maybe, a beginning of something new, but finale for those years. Let me just dive right in. It is called a *Systematic Introduction*. I think today, I'll be anything but systematic. I am going to merely talk about three points that went into making this book. One started it, one almost put a halt on it, and the third has been following me all along. They're called philosophy, critique, and Israel-Palestine. You can guess what is what.

Philosophy-- so the first question is, of course, why does one want to do philosophy of human rights? Human rights is usually addressed in academia, of course, either in political science or in the law schools, not much in philosophy. Philosophy has been much later getting on board, and much less of it on board than the work the law schools do on human rights or the political scientists. So I just felt this urge, as I do about everything, to problematize it-- not to philosophize it, but to problematize human rights, since I had been doing human rights on the ground, so to speak, for many, many, many years.

So that was the impetus for doing *Philosophy of Human Rights*, but what does it mean to do philosophy? And this is not Philosophy 101 to tell you what is philosophy. For me, it means asking conceptual questions analytically and critically. Those are the three things-- conceptual, analytic, and critical.

So the point is, of course, what are the concepts that invigorate us when we do human rights. There is, of course, human-- what is the human? There is, of course, the concept of rights. There is always dignity, dignity, dignity. And I'll return to that, talk of equality, of liberty. There are usual suspects-- conceptual suspects-- that go into any discussion of human rights. And I thought that's what I would do. Just, in some organized fashion, go through a lot of concepts that have to do with human rights.

Theory-- is there theory here? And Sally, I hope, will come to that later. There is a feeling, in some philosophical circles, that if you present a theory-- a philosophical theory-- you then go to the ground and apply that theory. That is not what I do when I do philosophy. That is not how I think of philosophy.

But the question was, how can I systematically present theories of human rights-- not "a

theory," but "theories" of human rights. And that was, I think, the thought I had originally. Here I am presenting theories of human rights, and let's see what to do with them. That didn't work. And I'll get to the reason why it didn't work when I talk about critique. It didn't work just telling the theory of human rights and then applying it.

The other way worked much better, which was investigating what is going on in human rights now through a conceptual perspective, thinking of what is going on now through a philosophizing of it. And that was what I tried to do. Talk about refugee rights-- the question was, of course, who and what is a refugee? Women's rights-- what is gender equality? Disability was a real hard one. How do you even start talking conceptually about that issue of disability?

So I was working from the ground up, so to speak, trying to figure out the analysis of these concepts that we all use, we all think through, when we do human rights. At some point, I became very skeptical thinking about these, as perhaps not legitimately in the human rights arena. Maybe it's not really human rights. And there was always that practice holding me to the ground. What we do when we do human rights, those of us who are parts of the organizations. And I had the good luck to be a part of the tragedy of human rights in Israel.

So that was the map that I thought I would draw when I started. And then critique came about. How do I criticize? And critique for me is not criticism. They are different. Again, philosophers use the word critique in very interesting ways. But I have to admit that at that point, when I tried to think about critique, I stopped writing. I could no longer figure out what I was presenting here.

And that brought about a long hiatus-- not a stop, but a long hiatus. And I still don't know if what I have managed to present as a critique makes sense or any sort of organized systematic sense. Let's face it. Human rights theory and theories are a child of liberalism writ large. People who talk human rights usually, 99% percent of the time, talk liberalism.

And certain issues in human rights or issues in political philosophy-- that long conflict between equality and liberty-- well, liberalism won out. A certain liberalism won out. And liberty took over human rights, much more than equality. Individual versus group-- the individual won out. Human rights are human rights of individuals. Here and there, you hear talk about group rights. But they're usually quietened.

Proper disclosure, I am not a liberal. So critiquing human rights seriously means critiquing

liberalism. And I was worried about being caught up in this anti-liberalism that is so tempting. The question was, how do we look at human rights differently while critiquing liberalism? Are we still speaking about human rights?

And the one chapter, not a long chapter in here, that's called Philosophical Critique of Human Rights is the one where I brought in the heroes and heroines of some of our lives-- those of us who live philosophy. I'll just mention the names. We start with Karl Marx, of course. We go through Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, Etienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, and always, always, always, Hannah Arendt.

I hope those names just ring certain bells. They are definitely not a part of any systematic work. They're a part of trying to unearth what is going on here when you talk about human rights, not through liberalism. So as I say, that's the part that took a long time writing. And then I landed back on the comforting zones of criticism-- not critique-- arising from very conventional political philosophy, even people in the law. And there you've got the current contemporary active philosophical criticism of human rights. I'm speaking of Alan Buchanan, or Joseph Rassa, or Charles Bates, or Michael Ignatieff, even, who are always talking about the law and politics writ large-- some great idea of political theory.

There are people like Marianne Glendon, who thinks that we are overdoing it in the way we talk about rights, and David Kennedy who has an amazing line that says, "We have met the empire, and it is us-- us, being the human rightists." And every time I see that sentence, I think, where are you coming from? And when, last, have you been within human rights?

And then, of course, there are the very wonderful thinkers, starting with Makau Matua, Stephen Hopgood, Conor Gearty, and Samuel Moines, who bring us back to Wittgenstein's rough ground. They want us to do human rights as politics writ small-- as activism. So that type of criticism got me back on the ground, yet again.

And then there is Israel-Palestine. And I have mentioned, I keep trying to stress that this was a book on the philosophy of human rights. And that didn't mean taking a theory and applying it to any place or any time, let alone Israel-Palestine. But it did mean, for me, making it relevant to real life and to my real human rights life.

There are very few illustrations in the book, very few examples. It's a book of philosophy. There are not many case studies. Except in the case of Israel-Palestine, there are two case studies. One has to do with the Palestinian refugees, which is the ultimate story of refugee

rights. The other with that thing in Israel called the security wall, sometimes called the separation wall, sometimes called the separation fence, sometimes called all sorts of other things. And the way someone calls that wall places them immediately in a certain political place.

So those are two case studies that I couldn't stay away from. And they seem, I think, out of place for the systematicity again. But they were things that I had to say there. As I said, I had the luck of being in those places at that time.

What I want to do to put all of this together is, to read from the book the very beginning, and the preface, and the very end, and the epilogue. And I hope that what I read will somehow put together the philosophy, the critique, and of course, Israel-Palestine. This is the very beginning, almost page number two. "My particular local Israeli-Palestinian human rights setting consisted, during these past decades, of the human rights organization, B'tzelem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

The name of the organization, its provenance, and development is a story in its own right, and uncannily reflects some of the very questions that must be dealt with in a philosophy of human rights. B'tzelem, literally, means 'in the image of.' It is a partial quote from the book of Genesis. And this is the quote. 'So god created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.'" By the way, he just created man that way. He created man and woman. But he only created man in his image. But we'll leave that for another conversation.

"In Hebrew, the four English words, 'in the image of' are voiced by only one word-- b'tzelem-- in the image of God, becoming b'tzelem Elohim. The interpretation of that verse and of the idea that man was created in the image of God has, since antiquity, supplied religious and secular thinkers with a panoply of conceptual challenges regarding the human being's likeness to God-- free will, power, behavior, exceptionalism, and corporeality, et cetera.

But the modern, explicit reading of the term b'tzelem calls it to serve as a synonym for dignity. The human essence, touted by the claim that we're created in God's images is precisely our inherent dignity. And it is the claim of such essential dignity that initiates, for both believers and nonbelievers, the concept of human rights. Unsurprisingly then, the NGO, B'tzelem, by name and in practice, has also served to expose, in my mind, problems that accompany the investigation of human rights, their religious grounding, their moral bases, their politicization, and their universality, to name just an obvious few.

B'tzelem was scarcely founded in 1989 when a philosopher friend, Adi Ophir, wrote an article in the weekend magazine of a popular newspaper--" it doesn't exist anymore-- "Davar, that was called--" the article-- "Documentation as an Act of Resistance. And it stopped many human rights do-gooders in their tracks. In the setting of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, despite accepting the presupposition that human rights organizations in that setting were intent on exposing and fighting against the violations of human rights that the occupation entailed, Ophir showed how working within the system-- that is, as a law-abiding, normative organization-- led us into collaboration with the powers that be.

Using both conceptual and political argument, a fear swept the rug out from under our feet, so to speak. He put the seed of doubt into our heretofore complacent enterprise of liberal human rights. And now, almost 40 years later, I hold fast to the quaking that that early criticism evoked in us, both activists and philosophers. It is the criticism of the liberal idea of human rights, but also of the on-the-ground doings of its practitioners that therefore occupies the final chapters of this book." So that's how B'tzelem started, right at the beginning. It was good for philosophers because you don't want to go straight ahead. You always want to figure out what's going on.

The second last page says the following. This is the epilogue. "We shall end with a story, this time a real story, a real and tragic story. It happened in 1997 in the occupied Palestinian territories, during the years when there seemed to be some movement in the direction of a peace agreement." This is between Israelis and Palestinians.

"It is an ironic happenstance that in times of relative political quiet when the guns are not incessantly shooting and hope is in the air, human rights organizations are welcomed into the social fold, rather than despised as unsolicited censure. It was in that kind of ambiance that in a village near Hebron, a Palestinian holy city to Muslims and Jews, a four-year-old girl was raped by a mentally-disabled young man while the village people were all celebrating a wedding.

The little girl readily identified the rapist. She knew him from the neighborhood. And he was immediately apprehended by the Palestinian Authority, just in time, it turned out, for he was about to be lynched by the enraged villagers. It seemed that both the Palestinian enforcement organs and the Palestinian judicial system were in control.

This control, however, was elusive. Within three days, the official figures of the Palestinian

Authority-- the political pseudo government that had been charged with governing some parts of the occupied territories-- had incarcerated him, indicted him, tried him, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. This seemed to hardly be a fair and legal procedure, conversant with human rights and lawful constraints. B'tzelem, the Israeli Information Center, and the equally conscientious Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Ramallah, in a seemingly commendable cooperative human rights project, began investigating the events, collecting evidence, receiving witnesses' reports, tallying up the various stories, all with the purpose in mind of defending the young man's human rights to due process, at the least.

We do not here wish to suggest that the young man's rights were unimportant. We do not in any way wish to impugn them. We only wish to point to the ignorance and blindness which accompanies certain well-meaning activists and advocates, while they're pursuing their quote, 'enlightened goals.'

For it came to pass that within three months, the village was in a social shambles. The little girl's father had divorced his wife for having failed to watch over her daughter during the festivities. And the men who were married to the wife's four sisters did the same, for traditional religious reasons of family honor.

The young man's family who had watched over his, in their own respect, for years, were the victims of tangible ostracism. Some young people who had been responsible for keeping order throughout the wedding were shamed into withdrawing from any public activities. Long-term relationships built on familial and social trust were ripped apart. And all of this, as a result of the diligence of the human rights organizations. For these probes had exposed what would otherwise have remained hidden.

Enlightenment deplores the darkness of hidden secrets. Enlightenment distributes information freely. Enlightenment does this with pure motives concerning the human condition. But enlightenment, in the guise of human rights, in this story, brought about so many added tragedies."

And then I go into some conceptual thinking about universalism, relativism, and all of that. "Our tale of the little girl near Hebron and her wretched rapist may sway some to the side of relativism. Was it not the naive universalism of human rights workers that brought about the disasters of the village? Would not a more particularistic context-sensitive approach have been better suited to deal with that event? Perhaps, and perhaps not."

And then I end with philosophy again. "The tragic happenings of the village near Hebron can be perhaps more effortlessly interpreted as an instance of what John Dewey was pointing at when he said, quote, 'The individual may be moved by sympathy to labor for the good of others, but because of lack of deliberation and thoughtfulness, be quite ignorant of what their good really is and do a great deal of harm.'" End of Dewey's quote.

"Indeed, the brand of philosophical systematization that we have been tracking here has often been issued as being too alienated, too demanding, too disconnected, from the real life of human rights work. Perhaps, precisely the right attitude to the deep questions of human rights-- thought and activism-- is the Dewey-an approach. Call it the pragmatic personal approach.

One should inculcate and teach human rights vocabulary. One should insist on its internalization. One should estimate real-life situations. One should address real motivations and interests of politicians. And one should never lose sight of the human contexts in which we fight for human rights." Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

I am now supposed to call Serena to the podium. And again, proper disclosure-- Serena, and Sally, and I have been working on these things together for many years.

SERENA PAREKH: Thank you, Anat. It's so great to see what a fantastic turn out there is. If anyone is sitting at the back and wants to take a seat, there are a couple of seats up front. It won't disturb me.

So let me begin by congratulating Anat on a truly excellent book. It's incredibly rich, spans so many different kinds of scholarship, and is engaged with both the practice and the struggles for human rights on the ground, in addition to covering an expansive philosophical literature. It's incredible.

So what I like to do in my comments is simply to point out a few of the features of the book that I thought were particularly insightful and interesting, and then suggest a couple of areas that we might extend Anat's argument.

So the first part of my comments is called How philosophy can help us to understand how to make human rights work better. As someone who's been teaching an introductory Philosophy of Human Rights course off and on for the past 15 years, I can say that the idea of another book on the philosophy of human rights filled me with dread. I have come to groan whenever

another book comes out, claiming to have a new theory of human rights, or to have solved the philosophical paradoxes of human rights-- paradoxes, I should point out, that are often only of interest to philosophers, and are generally irrelevant to the actual struggles by people to realize their human rights.

So it was with much relief that I read Anat's book and found that she doesn't just engage with these intellectual puzzles for the sake of engaging with puzzles, but with a genuine concern for developing our understanding of the topic so that both scholars and activists can move human rights forward. She engages with the way that philosophical tensions actually impact the practice of human rights, and the ways that we make claims for and advocate for human rights.

Take her discussion of women's rights, as an example. It's widely accepted that women's rights around the world are in dire straits. And the sheer extent of the human rights violations against women mean that, in effect, they are not women.

Let me read part of a quote from Catharine McKinnon that Anat quotes to illustrate this. "If women were human, would we be cash cropped from Thailand in containers into New York's brothels? Would we be worked without pay our whole lives, burned when our dowry money wasn't enough, or when money men tire of us? Would we be allowed to work for pay, be made to work at the most menial jobs, and exploited at barely starvation levels? If women were human, would we have so little voice in public deliberations and in government in countries where we lived? There are many other examples that could be mentioned here."

The problem, of course, is not only the extent of women's human rights violations, but also how governments respond to them. Very often, these violations are treated as secondary and less important to the real human rights issues, usually understood to be ones that affect men. Recently, a 7-year-old girl was killed in Mexico, sparking a series of protests by women who took to the streets and defaced public buildings in response to what they took to be an insufficient response by the government.

Seven-year-old Fatima was one of the 10 women killed every day in Mexico. The government responded by asking the protesters not to paint on the walls and to be patient. As one activist put it, the government is more concerned with preserving monuments than saving women's lives.

And this is the crux of the problem. Given how extensive women's human rights violations are and the indifference they are often met with, how should we advocate for women's human rights? The solution in the latter part of the 20th century was to claim that quote, "women's rights are human rights." And while the slogan was much used, it's unclear that it was very effective. And while there are many reasons for this, Anat helps us to understand how the philosophical tension at the heart of the slogan may have contributed to this.

So this is the paradox at the heart of claiming that women's rights are human rights. This is Anat's point. "It seems that, to accept that the group of women are not a part of the group human, and therefore need different rights. It accepts the kind of misogynistic logic that work to actually deny women rights." In Anat's words, "The more rights are specified as women's rights, the more they reinforce the definition of women as different, both legally and in ordinary language.

Yet without doing that, that is, without stressing that women's rights are different from what is usually assumed to be human rights, women's rights do not get sufficient attention. The more a right is accepted as gender neutral, the more it will enhance the structural deep-seated privilege of men. Both approaches seem to undermine women's ability to claim their human rights."

What I found helpful about Anat's approach and her way of articulating this problem is that it was not done merely as an academic exercise or to discredit human rights as illogical-- as others have done, as Anat mentioned. Anat's goal in pointing out this tension is to help us to get to the heart of why we haven't made more progress, intellectually or practically, on women's human rights.

The divide, as I had previously understood it, was with universal human rights that focused on the rights needed in the public sphere, the rights to vote and to run for office, for example, that are often associated with men. While the rights that are important to women are the rights that have to do with the private realm-- the right to be free from domestic violence, for example. Anat's way of framing the paradox of human rights, actually illuminates why just focusing on the public-private divide is not sufficient and why re-conceptualizing women's human rights might be necessary in order to realize human rights in practice. I left thinking that I really needed to think more deeply about what this means for the future of women's human rights.

Now, in the spirit of pushing the conversation, let me suggest a few ways that Anat's argument

might be extended, and some elements of human rights that I would like to have seen developed more deeply. To be sure, I'm not critiquing Anat's book for not talking about all the things that I find interesting. Given the wide array of topics covered and the sheer scope of scholarship discussed, such criticism would be petty, at best.

So I just want to suggest some ways that we could extend her argument. While I particularly liked Anat's chapter on the burning human rights issues of women's rights, disability rights, and refugees, I would have liked to see a more explicit engagement with human rights in the US. There's a couple of reasons for this. First, many readers are likely to be located in the US, and are eager to understand how human rights could be used to think about our political challenges.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, I think that many students, and many people more broadly, think that human rights are something that other countries have a problem with, but that we, with our Constitution and Bill of Rights, don't really need. I would have liked to see more of an emphasis on the failure of the US to ratify many of the central pieces of international human rights law that are widely accepted by other countries, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by every country except for us and Somalia.

It would have been interesting to see her discussion of economic rights, for example, tied to poverty and homelessness in the US. The report on poverty in the US, written last summer by the UN Special Rapporteur on Poverty, Philip Alston, was discounted, unsurprisingly, by current officials, and many in the US. Nikki Haley, the ambassador of the time, said that the UN should focus on countries in Africa that do so much worse things.

And I think this is all too common an assumption. And many of the issues and problems Anat discusses in her book, do readily apply to the US. But perhaps, connecting Anat's ideas to human rights in the US is something that teachers can encourage their students to do in the classroom.

Finally, what will students take from Anat's book? I read it as someone who teaches an introduction to human rights class, and had my students in mind. In my experience, students' attitudes about human rights fall on a spectrum. On the one hand, students start out genuinely hopeful about the potential for human rights to achieve a kind of progressive social justice they hope to see in the world, around women's rights, LGBT rights, refugee rights, and among

others. And they often grow disillusioned when they realize the challenges associated with human rights and the "one step forward, two steps back" nature of human rights progress. And I appreciate that, at several points, Anat is attentive to the hopelessness that sometimes emerges when students begin to study and critique human rights.

On the other hand, some are inherently skeptical about human rights, and worry that it's ineffective without a coercive enforcement mechanism. Or they fear that its political power will lead it to be abused by leaders. Some are old enough to remember the way the Iraq invasion was justified on human rights grounds, at least for a time.

What should students take from Anat's book? Or to put it in Anat's words, "After thinking about all the philosophical theories and on-the-ground problems, we must ask, where do we go from here?" And I think the answer she gives speaks to another strength of Anat's books. Her answer is, embrace the political.

But what exactly does this mean? Her discussion of the political is woven throughout her book. Anat urges us to think of politics more broadly than the usual way we think about it, meaning institutional policies or legal approaches. As Anat mentioned, as activism or in the sense of Hannah Arendt acting with other people, collectively.

Anat encourages us to make a distinction between Human Rights, with capital letters, and human rights with lowercase letters, a distinction that is lost when you are speaking. This is a distinction I had never considered before, but one I think she is absolutely right about. Capitalized, Human Rights refers to the institutional exercise of power. That is, organized institutional bodies, law, courts, organizations that raise money, write reports, run international campaigns, lobby governments, and in Hopgood's phrase, "claim to speak with a singular authority in the name of humanity as a whole."

Lowercase human rights politics refers to the down-to-earth, informal, activist version of human rights. Local and transnational networks of activists who bring publicity to abuses in communities and try to exert pressure on governments and the UN for action. They use fewer formal mechanisms and tend to use the language of human rights in a more flexible way.

Anat's point is that a lot of the problems students encounter with human rights-- the disillusionment with institutional mechanisms, the potential for abuse of power-- are mostly concerns with capitalized Human Rights politics. When we look on-the-ground work of human rights activism being done by individuals and in communities to further deepen human rights,

we see that human rights work is a lot less problematic.

And I love this distinction. I think it's a really helpful way to help students understand how the language of human rights can change things and the importance of individual action and activity. It's a point that I think Hannah Arendt would have really appreciated, since it reflects the power of natality, the power that we, as individuals, have to work collectively to change the world. It gives us a way to think about how our own actions can be effective to further human rights.

But I worry that in 2020, students will not find this idea convincing, and fear that this review relies too much on a tacit assumption that the arc of history always bends toward justice. Too often today, we see people using lowercase human rights methods to mobilize against rights, such as trans rights, women's reproductive freedoms, and refugee rights. That is, they are using the on-the-ground politics to push back against human rights, or at least in favor of their own interpretation of human rights, such as the right to life, the right to bear arms, and the right for, say, a white supremacist to march and speak in public. And I think it's important to acknowledge that the lowercase human rights methods can cut both ways.

But perhaps, then, that is right, that this kind of political engagement is as good as it gets. And it's on-the-ground struggle for human rights that is the core of how we should engage with human rights. Anat's book, then, is extremely helpful in this endeavor.

Though now repetitive, let me close with the final words from Anat's book that summarize the attitude she hopes her book will inculcate in readers, and an attitude, I think, would be great to have for people engaging with these struggles around human rights. She writes, "Perhaps, precisely the right attitude to the deep questions of human rights thought and activism is the Dewey-an approach. Call it the pragmatic personal approach. One should inculcate and teach human rights vocabulary. One should insist on its internalization. One should estimate real-life situations. One should address real motivations and interests of politicians. And one should never lose sight of the human context in which we fight for human rights." Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

SALLY

Everybody, nice to see you all here. So you're going to hear some common themes in what

HASLANGER:

Anat talked about, and Serena talked about, and even some of the same quotes. So sorry for repetition.

So the book is amazing. It's insightful, encompassing, and beautifully written. There are three things I especially love about it. First, It's not a defense of a position. So as Serena was saying, it's not like, OK, this is my theory of human rights. It's a practice of questioning. As she says, quote, "The focus on questioning emphasizes the pluralistic, non-dogmatic, never-ending nature of philosophy," unquote.

Anat's questioning approaches the topic from multiple angles-- conceptual, analytical, historical, legal, practical, and critical. And the goal is to get a sense of the problems, an understanding of the terrain, and not to solve the tensions, but to acknowledge them and to give us resources for navigating them. So if you think about it, this is a kind of pragmatist theme, I think, comes from-- if you want to get from point A to point B and you don't know what the terrain is like, you're going to be much worse off. So if you've got this book, you've got a sense of the terrain, and you can navigate it. But that doesn't presuppose we're all going in the same direction, all trying to get to the same place, or all coming from the same place.

Second, Anat brings to the discussion, not only her philosophical training, but her activist experience, and her deep commitment to justice. She recognizes that the issues are political, and they never cease to be represented as such throughout the book. And third, although Anat believes in philosophical inquiry and that we should "teach and inculcate human rights vocabulary and insist on internalization," in the end, actually in the epilogue, she questions whether systematic philosophical approach can be relied on, and whether it might lead us to do great harm that we might avoid only by drawing on a sensibility that emerges in the face of human tragedy. Her brilliance, her deep values, and her humanity are vividly demonstrated throughout the book.

So I'm not going to offer a criticism of the book, of the arguments, or the questions, or how she's going about it. What I'd like to do is enter into a dialogue with her on behalf of some of the peoples that she's discussing in the book. It's not really a dialogue. There's more of us than just two. But there's a kind of conversation, at certain points in the book, about the critiques of human rights from philosophers. So I'm going to talk a bit about that on behalf of some of the people that she's characterizing, specifically Marx Foucault, Joan Scott, Wendy Brown, and a bit less, in this particular piece, Arendt. And I'm going to try and extend her engagement with these authors.

So according to this critique, there's something overly individualistic, overly atomistic, overly

abstract, about the focus on human rights. As Anat says, "This is not to deny that human rights have a conceptual worth or even a political value, yet perhaps on this approach," she says, "rights that exist in the legal domain, and may, at the same time, alleviate extreme suffering, do not really address the essential point at hand."

So I think it's worth trying to articulate what this "essential problem at hand" might be, if it's not relieving the extreme suffering. Anat rightly characterizes the critics is pointing to a paradox in the logic of human rights. So what is that paradox? There are a variety. Serena pointed to some. And I've pointed to some. So this is one of the many paradoxes.

So Anat suggests, at base, human rights discourse has a self-contradictory attitude towards men as both autonomous and a member of society. You might say, well, what's so contradictory about that? You can be autonomous and in society. There is no self-contradiction there. We do it all the time, right? There's nothing weird about that.

But she also goes on to suggest that insisting on women's rights is not a way to free women, but quote, "encircles women inside a legal semantic fence that is continuing to speak in neutral universal rights jargon, permits traditional social hierarchical presuppositions to continue as before." But what is this semantic fence that is enclosing me? And why isn't claiming my rights a way to break through the fence? So these are characterizations that Anat gives of her interlocutors. And so I'm going to try and not play devil's advocate. As they often say, the devil doesn't need an advocate. The devil has plenty. But I'm going to try and sort of spell this out about what this paradox might be.

So I think all of these authors are presupposing a view of human life as a social life. It is life within society within a social structure. To exist within a social structure is, however, to be shaped by it, to be disciplined, in Foucault's view, interpolated on Althusser's view. So the idea is that we are not fully human until we're called into or disciplined into a kind of social position. Our consciousness, our identities, our awareness-- all of this-- is only possible within a social frame.

So the shaping isn't just repressive, and constraining, and controlling, it is also enabling, empowering, and productive, for it makes any particular form of concrete agency possible. You're not going to be just a pure human being. We're not pure humans, we are men and women. We have race and ethnicity, a class, and such.

Jack Balkan makes this point very nicely in his book, *Cultural Software*. He says, "People

become people only when they enter into culture, which is to say, only when culture enters into them and becomes them, when they're programmed with and hence constituted by tools of understanding created by a culture at a certain point in history. Through existence in history, which is existence in culture, people obtain and incorporate cultural tools. And these become as much a part of them as their arms and legs.

Yet of course, we are shaped to be what is required for the system to continue more or less as it is. And under unjust conditions, we are shaped to reproduce the injustice." This is how social reproduction works. We are shaped to reproduce the structure that is already there. If the structure is already there is unjust, we are shaped to reproduce that injustice.

"Human rights discourse demands rights for individuals existing within society-- men and women, whites and nonwhites, disabled and able-bodied, straight and queer, Israelis and Palestinians. But these individuals have been constituted as such within a system that prioritized certain interests over others, certain forms of life over others." Do I have a right not to be constituted as a woman? Do I have a right not to have been constituted as white? Who is this "I" that bears this right? I am Sally, a white woman, a professor at MIT-- all of these sorts of things. And who is this "I" that has a right not to be this, because this is who I am.

Do I have a right not to be implicated in capitalism? Do I have a right not to be governed by the hegemony of the nation state-- the global hegemony of the nation state? So think of it a bit like this. We might think of workers' rights. I think workers' rights are tremendously important. But workers' rights already presuppose we're under conditions of capitalism. So should we maybe step back and say, well, yes, of course, we need workers' rights. And as Anat says, none of this is denying that we need these rights. But isn't there another question of, why do we need those rights? We need those rights because we live under capitalism. And shouldn't there be another critique that's added to that, which is the critique that has created workers, and created capitalists, created men and women, created white people, and black people, and people of color.

So it seems then that either we claim that there is some abstract human "I" who has this right-- it isn't Sally, because Sally is a white woman living in the 21st century US. But then who is this, and how can we respect their rights not to be what they have become? Or we can claim that the rights are Sally's rights-- rights she has as a woman? But if you protect me as a woman, aren't you simply insisting that I'd be what the system demands of me? That I identify with and enact the problematic position that I have been constructed to fit.

OK, so there, I think, is kind of the paradox. Now, I think there are a variety of ways around this paradox. We can speak on my behalf without assuming that I can only exist as a woman or only exist with a social profile. I think that's a possibility that is a little bit occluded in this idea that I am a woman. I am-- yeah, not so much.

But anyway, also, we can say that there's been injustice in the constitution of me as who I am and in the role that I'm in. We can say that constituting me as such implicates me in injustice, and that's a problem. And I think we can claim for women, a right to refuse to be women and to participate in other ways in systems of domination other than as the oppressed or as the oppressor.

But I'm not interested in getting into the details of solving this paradox. I'm really interested in the critique, because I think Marx and others invite us to situate the issues of rights and history somewhat differently than often is done by philosophers. And I think that Anat is sympathetic to this. And this is partly what she's doing too.

The question isn't only how we can protect the individuals that society has produced from violations by others. You know, we're not just trying to protect workers from violations of capitalism. Part of what we want to do is challenge capitalism and challenge the exploitation that capitalism enacts constantly. How can we insist that our social systems produce individuals who aren't shaped to be subordinate, aren't shaped to be dominant, aren't shaped to function within existing systems of exploitation?

These, I think, are kind of the deeper questions that the Marxians-- you know, Marx, and Foucault, and Wendy Brown, and John Scott are trying to ask. Not to say that we don't need to protect people once they've been constituted to fit within these regimes. We do. But we have to be very careful when we're undertaking those protections, that we're not somehow presupposing and reifying the structures that are the source of the problem.

So return to what we might consider the essential problem at hand. It may be that we should be concerned with the immediate wrongs against individuals who are not being treated with dignity, with respect, or in keeping with their rights. I believe that, I think, that as Anat said, that Marx and all of these people believed that. But perhaps a deeper question is how the social structures that produce individuals, how individuals produce, and what they are produced to be might be changed.

These questions about social reproduction are historically situated. Anat says, the right to act is a right to an identity. But what identity should be available? Or how should we take them up or resist them? Those are questions that can't be settled a priori. There are many different ways to live a meaningful life with others. And what options are realistic depend on features of our biology and geography that change due to natural forces and technology. So the discussion of human rights can't help but be ongoing and situated.

Here's another quote from Balkan. "We concrete-ize our indeterminate value of justice by creating human institutions and practices that attempt to enforce it and exemplify it. Hence the institutions that people construct to exemplify justice may be different in different eras and different lands. Human beings can also generate ever-new examples of injustice and oppression through their cultural constructions. In different times and places, human beings find new ways to work evil on their fellow creatures and to create monuments to brutality and repulsiveness."

So it's an open question what we can be, how we can live together justly, happily, and meaningfully. We can work to guard against and repair the worst offenses, but we must also work to create structures that reproduce themselves by shaping us to be agents of justice and agents of good. Anat turns to do Dewey and a kind of pragmatism at the end. And I think she's suggesting that our best hope is not to rely simply on philosophy to give us a set of rules to follow, but also to be responsive to and critical of each other in our humanity, in actual circumstances, and build communities and societies with that sensibility in mind. This is how we do philosophy on the rough ground. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]

KENNETH OYE: It takes two hands to get the microphone. This one? OK, good. So my name is Kenneth Oye. And I'm a professor in Politics and Data Systems and an old admirer and friend of Anat, and Sally, and a new friend of Serena's.

We're going to go to a Q&A right now. And I have a request, which is, please identify yourselves. Give a little sense of where you're coming from, if there is an organizational affiliation. We can talk about group and individual identity later. But please do keep the questions as questions, and not as extended commentaries. This is at Cambridge, Massachusetts. We've been through enough Q&A's all together to have noted a tendency for 45-minute questions to be post.

And so we have a microphone on that side with Michelle. I have one here. And if you would like to pose a question to our great panel, please do raise your hand. And stand up for the camera, speak clearly, give your social security number, your mother's maiden name, and your first automobile.

AUDIENCE:

Wow, I think that's a hard one to follow. So my name is [INAUDIBLE]. I'm originally from Cameroon. I find this session really intriguing. And I'm so proud to be here today. I'm on the city council of the city of Somerville. I'm a city councilor. I also work at MIT. And I think this topic about human rights-- first, this is my first staff forum attending, because just the topic, actually, is very appealing and very intriguing to me.

And so listening to you talking, it seems like, to me, you've grabbed the fundamentals of what is going on around the globe. And so my question is, especially somebody from Cameroon right now, there's civil unrest, just as there is civil unrest all around the world. In Cameroon right now, according to the United Nations statistics, more than 670,000 internally displaced residents are going on.

And then there was just an incident a few days ago where 14 children were killed, 22 we're burned in houses. So the question is, as a politician myself-- and I've seen other professionals. Some are sitting right here-- that have been engaged in activism, like Ed, is somebody I know personally who has been at the forefront of issues that people care about. And there are multiple dimensions of this human rights issues that we are discussing here.

But my question is, how do you-- somebody mentioned, I think, Serena, about international kind of activism. How do you evolve yourself to a point where you can actually get traction and really ensure that something is actually being done, not just like learning this knowledge. And yet you cut out the practicality part of it. It's really-- you know, there's a lot of ambiguity in it. Nobody really knows what is happening.

This morning, I tweeted about the incident in Cameroon, calling on the French government to actually take action as to what is happening in Cameroon. It's been going on for more than four years. So what is your perception or your thinking, in terms of, not just Cameroon. I'm just using Cameroon because that's where I'm from. But around the world, do you think that institutions like MIT, Harvard, and other colleges, you have some branch in the international scholars office. Somebody that tracks some of these incidences around the world and bringing

traction to it and trying to contact, whether it's the foreign policy, or which government, the consulate, or whoever, to be able to give account and holding some of these individuals accountable so that we can live in a good human community where people have to live with dignity, that have to pursue their right to life, liberty, and happiness that we all strive for.

KENNETH OYE: And who would like to take on this challenge? Anat-- I knew it would be Anat.

ANAT BILETZKI: Thank you. Thank you for your question. And it brings to mind something that Sally said and something that Serena said. So I will, in that way, engage with them as well.

There is a mantra in the human rights-- is it human rights or in-- yeah, I think it's the human rights community, but maybe elsewhere, also. They tell us to think globally and act locally. And I don't even remember. I think I said in the book, but I'm not sure-- that I would turn that around and say, think locally and act globally. In other words, it is being exposed to local injustice, to local suffering, even, that wakes you up. I don't expect people to wake up because they read an article about Cameroon, even though that might be part of it. But I think people do get impacted by the local.

But the point of human rights, or of the way we live now-- our form of life now-- is a global form of life. We can't run away from what's happening in other places. I usually think about Israel-Palestine and how, just like you said, nobody here knew about something. Nobody here knows what's going on there. So what I do here locally is, try to get people to see, understand, and worry about what's going on in other places. That's the big answer.

The smaller question and answer-- I'm not putting it down-- is, what do we do with students? I don't know. Some of us are wonderful teachers because we speak rhetorically. Others are wonderful teachers because we speak quietly and work with particulars. There's different ways of teaching-- really teaching. And there, I think, it's a matter of not just personal charisma, but as Serena said, getting people to understand where they are.

So getting students to understand what is going on in the United States is important. But then I want them to act globally. There's something about human rights which insists on the global, or the international, or the cosmopolitan. And there's all those "-isms" there again-- globalism versus internationalism versus cosmopolitanism. They're all different ways of looking at things. But that's when, I dare say, that terrible word "universalism."

There is a point in human rights that goes that way. And it's a terribly problematic point,

philosophically. But there are things to do globally. There really are. So that's what I would take it.

SERENA PAREKH: So just add to that-- it's a great question. And it's, you know, one of the most important questions when you think about doing scholarship and activism. And I would say that my teaching and scholarship has been motivated by the following. I really think that politics, with a capital P-- institutions, laws, government-- are responsive to the beliefs and expressed ideas of its citizens.

And so when I'm teaching students, what I'm hoping to do is just to get them familiar with ideas and engaged with whatever they find passionate about so that, you know, they discover what's happening in Israel. And then that will motivate them to speak and to act and-- you know, if people don't know who refugees are and don't know what's happening to them, we can hardly be surprised that politicians will treat them terribly. So that's one of the things that I think is really important to do in teaching, and in scholarship, and when you're engaging with even intellectual communities like this, of people who are just interested in learning and understanding.

And the other thing, I think, it's important that I try to do in teaching-- and sort of to play on what Anat was saying-- was to pay attention to the ways that our local actions, behaviors, policies, are actually implicated in what's happening abroad. So we often think, like, there are problems in the US. And then there are problems abroad. And these are two separate issues. And if you scratch below the surface, often there is a deep interconnection. I mean, Israel-- it's maybe the most obvious example of this.

So when you think, well, what could I do as an individual? What could we do as citizens of the US? We're just American. What can we do about something in Cameroon or in Israel? Well, it turns out that there's a lot. And again, the government perceives our indifference, our apathy as being a signal that they can do whatever is in the interests of the powerful and their own interests. So I think there's a lot to be said about engaged teaching and engaged scholarship that can scratch the surface of the problem here articulated.

KENNETH OYE: Other questions? Yes, what I'm going to do is come back and ask you to stand up so that the camera can also get you into the frame, please. Yes.

AUDIENCE: Hi, my name is Cynthia, and I'm a graduate student here at MIT. And I'm doing research on broadly data analytics and optimization-- so applied mathematics. So thank you for the talk.

And so based on what you said, it seems that for some issues, there are systematic ways to analyze a problem-- well, I assume, in some cases. For example, the issue that in academic research, in some fields, there is less citation for women than for men. And it's less likely for a women, to be cited, for example. So you can have a quantitative measure for these type of issues.

But do you believe that, for things that you can quantify the problem, is there a systematic way to solve it? For example, to say, oh, by this year, we want equal ratio of gender citation, for example. Because it doesn't seem to work so much in some areas, right? Like, for example, ratio of female students versus male students in some areas. You cannot just say, I want equal numbers.

ANAT BILETZKI: Sally, you're the one who knows most about--

SALLY I had a t-shirt once. It was one of my favorite t-shirts. And I kept it and wore it until it fell apart.

HASLANGER: It said, "Equal rights for women by the year 2000." And it was, yes, I'm for that. We can update it, you know, "by 2025."

No, I don't think that we can quantify either what counts as justice in many areas. I mean, as you say, you might do it on numbers of citations. I'm not even sure that we can do it there. And I think, setting benchmarks, goals, those sorts of things are really great. But I think you're asking for some kind of prediction. And I don't think that humans are that predictable.

ANAT BILETZKI: Can I just add to that-- just one thing? There was an article. Louise, you must know. I can't remember. There was an article just recently about women in Scandinavia. How if you quantify, everything is fine. But everything is really not fine.

AUDIENCE: Are you about the [INAUDIBLE] paper on greater women's participation in STEM fields as a function of gender equity in the country?

ANAT BILETZKI: I don't think so. I think, maybe. But I remember that it struck me that counting is not going to help. Or counting might be a necessary condition, certainly not a sufficient one, for equity.

SALLY I think you have to have the-- you have to get information. I'm a great believer in empirically-

HASLANGER: based sort of interventions, and having data, and trying to use data to figure out where the problems lie. But I'm a believer in that. But I think often data is created by individuals who, themselves, are asking particular questions that are value laden, their measures are often

value laden, their choice of measures are value laden. So I have much less confidence in it all being easily quantifiable, myself, and solvable.

SERENA PAREKH: Just on that note, Kathryn Sikkink, who's a political theorist at Harvard-- she's done a lot of work on looking at data around human rights violations. And if you look at certain societies-- like, Sweden has the highest percentage of rape in Europe. And what she points out is that all that means is that they do a better job of actually getting data. And so if you at the places that have high incidence of sexual assault, that actually just means that they're good at collecting data. It actually isn't connected to any outcome that you would-- so it gives us some information, but not the information that's obvious from just looking at the data.

KENNETH OYE: OK, thank you. Let's see.

AUDIENCE: Hi, my name is Avi and I'm an undergraduate student in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. And I was wondering about your thoughts on-- I've sometimes read this take that human rights philosophy, as rooted in Western philosophy, there are sometimes paradoxes in trying to study places that have historically been like under colonialism. And I was wondering about your thoughts on this kind of tricky research situation of wanting to apply these frameworks to places that have this high historical context.

KENNETH OYE: OK, that looks like an Anat question to me.

ANAT BILETZKI: I don't know if I'm going exactly the way you were asking. But I mentioned Makau Matua, who I think, even though it seems late. And at the beginning of the aughts-- somewhere, 2002 or 2003-- wrote that very famous article. He gave the metaphor-- how does it go? Savage is something--

SALLY Is it in here?

HASLANGER:

ANAT BILETZKI: Yeah, it's in there. Basically talking about the picture we have of one part of the world, another part, human rightists, and the great Western enlightenment coming in as saviors. So they're savages, saviors, and something else-- a third thing.

SALLY Savages, victims, and survivors, the metaphor of human rights. *Harvard International Law*

HASLANGER: *Journal*, 2001.

ANAT BILETZKI: And I remember that article shaking us up. I would like to mention here Raj Balakrishnan, who

is, I think, in Urban Studies as well-- who has written, I think, the most wonderful book on how the law-- international law-- is all Western colonial law. And when I take Matua and Raj seriously, I just step back and say, I don't know how to look at this. The way I look at it is through my education Western eyes, human rights-- the human rights industry, as Alex always says, the human rights industry. What Sally was talking about-- human rights with a capital H-- no, Serena-- capital H and capital R. We're in that bubble when we do human rights. And that's why I think the criticism is so important, but so hard to do because it's very hard to step out of your bubble.

The one thing that Raj does is work with people in other places in the world. The first thing you have to do is just be there and see-- not just see, but be a part, if you possibly can, of looking at the whole idea of human rights differently-- from a different geographic, cultural, historical perspective. I don't know if we're able to. We are within our own industry, and the industry is now rich and controlled.

KENNETH OYE: Serena.

SERENA PAREKH: So I heard your question as a question about cultural relativism and whether human rights is simply imposing a Western dogma on non-Western cultures. And I mean, this is a really important question, and one that kind of raises its head every 10 years or so. I am more sympathetic to human rights on this than maybe Anat is. I know there are lots of anthropologists-- I mean, I think the position is not that we should go in heavy-handedly and impose our views on other people. But human rights can be used in a very meaningful way in a wide variety of contexts. But you need to be sensitive to that, of course, and there's lots of ways in which we haven't been. It's gone terribly wrong.

I teach a class on this. At the end of the class, I always say, there are only two groups of people who continue to believe in cultural relativism-- horrible dictators in non-Western countries who would like to use the veneer of culture to continue perpetrating practices that go against human rights and American college students who seem to be very concerned about this. Because on the ground, people who have their rights violated are less concerned with whether the dogma that they're-- or the language they're using is influenced by the West or not, or how it's framed. Because what they want is to have dignity, however they understand that. So I think human rights can be a part of it. It doesn't always, but it can be.

KENNETH OYE: In that observation on dignity being something which is more or less universal, and how the

people that are making the arguments on cultural relativism are often those who are the worst offenders of dignity, is certainly something to consider.

AUDIENCE:

Hi, I'm Louise Anthony. I teach at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I teach philosophy. Do I say that? I've been friends with one of these people for a long time, one of these people for virtually eternity, as far as human life goes, and Serena is a new friend.

So I thought I detected a kind of tension between the advice to act locally and contextually and Sally's warning that we not simply take people as they've been socially formed, but challenge the structures that form them in ways that are unhealthy. I wasn't exactly sure what the lesson was that you drew from the example that you recounted at the end. And maybe you want to say more about that, Anat.

But it did seem to me that often when someone promotes some reform, like providing childcare for parents that work outside the home, which is going to be, basically, mothers, in most places at this time. There can be a challenge to advocacy for that policy on the grounds that it's devaluing stay-at-home motherhood. And indeed, I think there are women who invest a great deal in a conception of themselves as having chosen a particular vocation in life that is being devalued or denigrated by women who choose to manage their career or their work and their family differently.

So I'm a little bit worried that paying attention to the context can very easily mean deferring to the social structures that are already in existence that have shaped people the way they are. So in Anat's example, at the end, I was worried that the background seems to be that if I take it that the people who are defending the rights of the rapist, who is also a man with a mental illness-- or saw themselves as defending his rights-- were failing to take into account the fallout of challenging-- I mean, maybe they were challenging his agency and saying, the parents should've been more attentive or something. But somehow, the fallout meant that mothers were being criticized for not being sufficiently attentive to their children.

But the expectation that falls disproportionately on women and the blame that tends to fall on victims, that's part of the social structure that we're dealing with. It should be, itself, the subject of critique. So I don't know if there's necessarily attention there. But it seems to me that that's something that needs negotiation in a careful way.

ANAT BILETZKI: Do you want to go, should I go?

SALLY You go.

HASLANGER:

ANAT BILETZKI: Well, I'll go first and then you go. Thanks, Louise. My original background was as a good old analytic philosopher, as Hilary Putnam used to say. And I've left that behind, which is not to say that I've become a Derridean or any type of postmodernist. And we're just throwing these labels around, I know.

I look for logical systematicity and I never find it because of the contradictions. And that's the only reason why I go to pragmatism, not because I think that James, or Dewey, or [INAUDIBLE] were great philosophers. Maybe they were great philosophers. It's not what calls me, philosophically. It gives me some way to look at real life, especially a story like that story in Hebron.

So what happened there-- until you mentioned it now, I didn't even think of it as a problem with women, but rather traditional, very hierarchical places that had a strong social glue holding them together. And that's what we had absolutely dismantled as human rightists going with the enlightenment, and with human rights law, and all the things that we know can work systematically and logically, et cetera.

So I think that's what brings me to that type of position. It's not that I'm a pragmatist from American pragmatism, not a pragmatist in the other way. It's that we need to look at-- I think you used the word, Sally-- suffering, concrete suffering. And that is almost the only criterion I have now, is where you can lower the suffering or somehow take care of the suffering.

I just want to add one thing. And this goes with something else that Sally said about the right not to be who you have been constructed to be. Another friend-- Ariella Azoulay at Brown-- when she talks about Israel-Palestine, she talks about the Israeli rights that are being violated, the right not to be an occupier. And I always laugh. I always laugh. I know she's saying something smart. So that's what I'm saying. I can't play the very intellectual game here, except to say that we have to take context into consideration more deeply than anything else. It's not a philosophical relativism at all.

SALLY I think there's another question.

HASLANGER:

AUDIENCE: First, I want to thank you three for the excellent points of view in human rights. I'm Samantha.

I'm from Brazil. And I have a company that is called Humanistic Responsibility, translated into English. And the purpose of this company is to promote a more human relationship in the workplace. So one of the tools that we use is class, because of the universal literature. And also philosophy and other fields of humanities, to improve the sensibility and treat each other as a person.

So I'd like to ask, what do you think about the personalism that is a field of philosophy? Use it, for instance, Jacques Maritain, Charles Taylor, and others, that says that human rights, or in order to promote the dignity of each other, we need to think about, respect each value of person, of each one of us. And this is a base of the duties that we have of promoting rights-- duty as a base to think about rights, human rights.

ANAT BILETZKI: Do you want to talk about it? Do you know Taylor?

SALLY I don't know that much. Do you know?

HASLANGER:

ANAT BILETZKI: No. I don't know exactly how I would answer that, except I want to focus on the word dignity-- on the concept of dignity. We've got dignity, you said respect, and you didn't say, but I always think of honor. I think in Hebrew, all three are the same word. And I think it is, I'm not sure. [HEBREW], right?

But I do make a big distinction between them. And I really don't care much about respect. I do care about dignity. Or I don't necessarily think that respect and dignity go together-- and honor, even less so. So there's something about dignity. And that's why what you're doing is so important. There's something about dignity that is elusive for me. And it's the great paradox of human rights. It's my desire to think of that as definitive of human rights, but my inability to really figure out what dignity is.

And by the way, maybe I quoted too much of B'tzelem and too much of God made us in his image. That, of course, is a religious answer to what is dignity. But that's not the answer that any devout secularist could adopt as the explanation of what dignity is. So I think that's where I would go with your question. Perhaps you were asking something else.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

ANAT BILETZKI: Personalism, yeah.

AUDIENCE: And the definition of this field is to promote and respect the value of person in another human being. So there are some philosophers that use this kind of field to think about human rights, like Charles Taylor, like Jacques Maritain.

SALLY
HASLANGER: So I think one of the problems is that what is it to respect me as a person? I mean, it's one thing to respect me as a woman. I prefer not to be respected as a woman, thank you very much. But some other women want to be respected as a woman. And so is respecting me as a person, letting me decide on what terms you respect me and how you show that respect? Now that would be ridiculous.

So I think that-- maybe moving away from respect to dignity may be is a way of moving. Because I don't know what it-- I mean, given that our systems of etiquette and social norms about how to treat each other vary so dramatically. And based on our social rules and our social positions that are encoded in those systems. Talking about respecting people just feels to me like a rat's nest, personally.

And so I think that Anat is right to move, maybe, to something like dignity. But there is a lot of questions that arise there as well. And I think that there are people who are totally invested in hierarchical structures of injustice with their whole being. That's what they're invested in. And if you're going to ask me to respect them and to say that they can carry on with their lives that way, I'm going to say, I'm sorry. My life is about dislodging them.

KENNETH OYE: And we have only 4.5 minutes left. So if we could have relatively brief questions and answers.

AUDIENCE: A very brief question-- Carlos Flores, a parent, no other identifiers. How, as a human, can we learn that we're all truly equal if we believe that? And if that's possible, then get beyond the concept of I as an individual or I as a member of my society. If I truly believe that I am equal to a woman or whatever the race is, and how do we learn to really teach that?

SERENA PAREKH: So I would say we learn the opposite. I think we teach children how to distinguish each other based on sex, and race, and these different categories. So pedagogically, I don't know how you don't do that. Because we need these shortcuts to carve up the world in these sort of efficient ways. But I don't think there is an inherent contradiction between these two. We can see each other in these different social roles that are valuable and meaningful to us. And then see what's equal about us is not that we are all the same skin color, but that we have this fundamental equality that transcends that and ought to be what guides our treatment in it.

So I feel like the distinctions aren't as much of a problem as what gets laid in with that. That's my experience as a parent.

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE]

KENNETH OYE: A good question, perhaps, for after the event.

AUDIENCE: Hi, I'm Melissa. I work here, MIT at D Lab, actually, in International Development. So when we're talking about Western culture, I do grapple a little bit about that-- development, like, who are we to come in and say, this is the way your economy should be?

But that's not what I'm here to ask. You mentioned something about dignity. And I really like thinking about human rights in that context. Do you ever think about what causes people to want to take dignity away from other people? What is the root of why we are here and why we have to have these conversations in the first place? And if you have any answers, let me know.

KENNETH OYE: OK, what a great question.

SALLY HASLANGER: So I think, this goes in a way connected to Serena's point, is that I'm disinclined to think that there's some psychological explanation of this in the nature of human beings or human psychology. That's not where I'm inclined to go. Because given the framework that I have, we are conditioned to reproduce society. And society comes to-- it's there. And we are situated in it, if we are lucky. If we're not lucky, then we aren't situated in it. And we're at a loss. So we are lucky to be situated in it.

But the system builds into it these power relations, and different kinds of meanings of different bodies, and all of these sorts of things. That if you're going to belong, if you're going to fit, you better learn that right from the beginning. And so it's not as if, oh, humans are destined to have conflict and see the other as the enemy, and things like that. It's like this is the history and culture. And we don't even have an imagination at this point about what it would be like differently because it has been like this for so long.

And that was sort of where I was getting to at the end was, we got to not just worry about the people who are being destroyed by it. We do need to be worried about that. But we need to worry about how to do things really differently. And I think we're not up against the limits of human psychology yet. We are up against the limits of power.

ANAT BILETZKI: Can I just add one last sentence about that? This brings me to mind of something that a bunch of us here were just reading this week. Erik Olin Wright, who said, apropos the-- not anti-psychologism, but not looking to psychology. When you ask about why or how people do what they do, the point is not to hold on to a presupposition-- human beings are good, or human beings are evil, or that whole human nature discussion that we've had forever, which was disconnected from the social and political structures in which this human nature was working.

The point that Olin Wright was making was that we have the obligation to provide the basis for that good part of our nature to somehow work out, to somehow be able to vocalize itself and operationalize itself. And let me just say in brackets, the only way to do that is through socialism. But that was just--

KENNETH OYE: So a comment on Anat's last comment-- and I just have to do this. Because listening to the panel and listening to the musings on identity and dignity, I kept thinking of my father. So my father-- and it's ironic, because it was 1942 that he was detained, imprisoned for years, on the basis of identity. Not one that you would necessarily choose, but one imposed upon you.

And talk about respect when you're sitting there in a prison camp in the middle of the desert. But respect is something which can be weakened or strengthened by the actions of others. So he kept telling us, when we were children, about this weird Quaker lady that came out to the desert. And it would be the kind of thing that could be decried as a Band-Aid, but it mattered. She was documenting what was going on. And her actions lent a degree of respect to those that were detained.

And he passed on a message which was that we-- meaning him, all of us-- have a duty, a responsibility, to act, to defend, the human rights and the dignity of others. But it wasn't us-- them, it was, you're on the other side of the barbed wire and you think about this.

Alex-- I'm staring at Alex. Alex, for those of you that don't know him is Anat's dutiful husband, who always does what he's asked. But Alex is the son of Holocaust survivors. And the lesson that he learned was, frankly, don't let this happen to others. So he does things that make him very unpopular in Israel, like campaigning for Arab parties. The point being that when we encounter challenges to our respect and our dignity, what we need to do is to be thinking more broadly with sensitivity to the terrain as Anat has described.

If you're interested in these themes, next Saturday, there will be an event in MIT's campus that will feature people who were interned in World War II, looking back on that period. But also

looking to current challenges to dignity, to children separated from their parents, to refugee policy, with a panel that would include Jackie Bhabha from Harvard Medical School-- a woman who was, in fact, imprisoned as a baby, and others. And this will be, again, 2 o'clock next Saturday as an MIT CIS event. But what remains is, thanks, to the panel. And to Anat, in particular, for a wonderful book and wonderful presentations. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]