

Just Immigration with Allison Wolf

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Insatiable Toad]

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

The immigration process is harrowing for many of the hundreds of thousands of people that arrive at the southern border of the United States each year. And this isn't an accident--from the US to South America, leaders write policies that deliberately make immigrating distressful. My guest today, the philosopher Allison Wolf, argues that these policies all share something in common: oppression.

Allison Wolf: And so, when I talk about oppression, I think about this network of policies, practices, and norms around immigration that, practically speaking, come together to trap groups of people just because they're members of those groups in situations where they really almost cannot win. And I think that when that's occurring, when those webs and networks are occurring in systemic ways, such that they're, it's almost impossible to avoid them. You can't imagine immigrating in ways that avoid any of these things, then that's what I'm calling oppression.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview with Allison Wolf on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: When the philosopher Allison Wolf heard a news story in 2014 about Central American children migrating to the United States, she was angry. She wasn't upset about the minors coming in the first place, she was furious about the heartlessness of her fellow Americans reacting to the crisis. Her feelings only intensified as the years went by. She read book after book about immigration. But it wasn't until she started writing about immigration that she discovered what was at the heart of the issue. By examining the stories at the center of dehumanizing policies, she realized that feminism, and its focus on oppression, could shed light on the problem of justice and immigration.

[interview begins]

Christiane: A lot of our listeners are based in the United States, and a lot of our listeners are probably also aware of at least some of the immigration problems and issues and policies that we've been talking about and experiencing in the last few years. But what I appreciated about in your book, *Just Immigration*, is that you write about problems that span most of North and South

America. Quickly set the stage for us, what are some of the biggest immigration issues we face in the Americas?

Allison Wolf: We have in the United States gotten stuck in this dynamic since the '90s, and even before, that majorly immigration is just about Mexicans coming to the United States to work. And then suddenly in the last five years, there's been a big gang problem and violence in Central America. And so, they're again, they're coming to the United States.

And it's kind of this failure to see that when you have a continent with so much inequality in it and where you have push-pull factors, that we don't see. And what I mean by that is that a lot of people, for example, are very aware that the US policy in the 1990s has something to do with the gang violence in El Salvador and Honduras, for example. But what most people don't know is that US intervention throughout Central America has been a prominent feature since the mid-1950s in the Cold War. And that has led to economic conditions and inequality that set up the United States in particular, to be seen as a destination and the best possible option for people to get ahead rather than stay in their own countries because we don't tend to invest in these countries.

We tend, since the Cold War, to formulate any effort to actually combat inequality in Central America and South America as some sort of communist plot and not a grassroots effort, or other political, internal political struggles within those nations, precisely to bring about better economic conditions and better social conditions in those nations. And so we have been systematically destroying democratic processes that we claim to want to promote and then get mad when people say, "Well, I guess the only choice is to go to the United States." And I think that, that goes all the way through Columbia where I live with the drug war and the idea that US investment has been primarily focused on supposedly ending drug violence. And not for example, in investing in the peace process that is currently going on.

So I think that we have two major factors going. We have the inequality where you have this very successful North American section of the United States and Canada right up against Mexico, which is a very historically important power in the region, and yet, has tons of economic and other sorts of political problems. And then you have US economic and foreign policy that goes back decades that have really undermined efforts to improve the region. And one place we see it is through immigration. And I think that, that's something we don't see as much because we're so busy looking for the one thing this country did, or the one thing that country did.

I'd say that grand historical perspective is really what we're missing in today's immigration discussion, which might seem weird, because I'm a philosopher, right? I should say, we're missing all these philosophical issues, which we of course are, but I think part of why we're even missing those, is because we're missing the history.

Christiane: Right. You can't philosophize about something where you're missing 90% of the story.

Allison Wolf: I was just going to say, I was just thinking something really concrete is the focus on open borders or closed borders or border enforcement. That seems like a huge issue because that's what we see on the news all the time in the United States. And for the folks

listening to the podcast, I'm sure you can tell by my accent that I'm not native Latin American, I'm from Los Angeles. I grew up in, spent most of my life in the US until very recently. And what we see on the TV all the time is focus on the border, focus on the border, all the abuses at the border.

And in the book I write about the borders and abuses at the border. Those are important, but almost everywhere else in the region, that is absolutely irrelevant. The only reason there is border control or even a desire for it is because the United States exports its policy to Mexico or Guatemala. But when the United States is not intervening, these nations had basically open borders between them. And frankly, they don't have the resources or the interest to guard them. And in some cases like in Colombia, they don't even have the capacity to guard the border because they're focusing on other things like the peace process and other such priorities. And so, the idea that border enforcement is what matters with immigration is increasingly strange to me.

Christiane: When philosophers take up this issue, the border question seems to be a big one, but you take up a feminist approach to immigration justice. So why is it important to look at immigration justice through a feminist lens, as opposed to, say, a rights-based approach or anti-racist approach?

Allison Wolf: When I say a feminist approach in the book I take that as a broadly defined approach. In other words, of course, gender is central to things, but when I say a feminist approach, what I mean is that the central concept that we should be assessing immigration policy on is whether or not it alleviates or reflects oppression in either in a nation or globally. And what that does, in contrast to, for example, a rights-based approach, is it stops us focusing our attention on individual behavior, in isolation, and rather focuses our attention on structures.

And I think that is a major thing that's missing, especially from the philosophical conversation, which makes sense because political philosophy and even human rights-based discussions in general, tend to focus on what individuals can and can't do and what individuals should and should not be able to do. And then we just make immigrants into a whole group of individuals who either have a right to come or don't have a right to come. And the problem with that is that we don't have any structural analysis at that point for what motivates those individual decisions, what constrains those individual behaviors.

So for me, the focus on oppression suddenly broadens our conversation immediately into global structures. And then when we go into global structures, we're going to see history pretty quickly. And we're going to see that, the border patrol, for example, did not suddenly become what it is. It was constructed for very different purposes. And only recently has it become an actual agency for keeping people out.

So I think that when we take a feminist approach, broadly speaking, suddenly all sorts of structures come into focus.

Christiane: If oppression is the central question, what is oppression?

Allison Wolf: Well, I always go back to my feminist mentor and Professor Marilyn Frye to answer that question, because she gives us the wonderful and now famous metaphor, I think, within these circles of a bird cage. Basically, what that's saying is that, there's not one thing or two things or three things that are messed up. It means that we're set up so that there's a mega network of barriers and impediments that exist in relation to each other to trap certain groups and some members of certain nations in double binds, in situations where they know they don't have a good out, systematically and intentionally, even if not consciously.

Someone might not consciously be like "This is going to make life miserable for anybody who's coming from Guatemala, hahaha." But that doesn't mean that they're not intentionally creating a system to make life hard for people from Guatemala to get to the United States. And I think a nice example of that is this combination of factors of sending an enormous amount of money to Mexico with a whole lot of pressure behind it to have more immigration enforcement within Mexico against Central American migrants, who used to be able to walk freely through Mexico undeterred.

You put that in combination with the fact that we're getting the State-sanctioned kidnapping of your children, and let's call it what it is. When you cross the border, you might not have said, "Oh, we hope that just because someone's Guatemalan, they suffer." But when you put those things together, there's an intention there that because of being a member of that group, you will suffer. Life will be harder for you than, say, someone coming from, Norway. And so when I talk about oppression, I think about this network of policies, practices, and norms around immigration that practically speaking come together to trap groups of people just because they're members of those groups, in situations where they really almost cannot win. Then that's what I'm calling oppression.

Christiane: The thing I like about your book is that you talk about these big philosophical issues, but then you also show how it actually works on the ground. So could you just give us an example of what somebody might be experiencing if they're in this double bind?

Allison Wolf: Let's think of a woman who's coming from Honduras with two teenage boys. And she actually might even have been making a living in Honduras, but the gang situation, the violence situation is so problematic that one of her sons was threatened by a local gang and she decided, "I know how this goes. I need to leave right now to save his life." In the past before certain barriers were put in place, that woman would have not had an easy journey, let us be very clear. She still would've walked, or paid smugglers to get her here and those are very dangerous. She probably would have risked violence from those smugglers, or maybe even being abandoned by them in the country. And those would have all been barriers from sexism, and just the way that various nations have not prioritized the safety of immigrants anyway.

So immigrants, and then female immigrants, especially, have always been vulnerable to these kinds of things. But now, that same woman is vulnerable to all those things, but she's going to face enormous amounts of military enforcement throughout the nation of Mexico. And she's not going to have a lot of money probably because it will likely be stolen on the route.

And so, let's just say she and her sons make it through this, and they make it somehow to the US border until very recently, but still, it's still going on. Now, they face various questions on the border in terms of her having to prove that she really deserves to have her case heard for asylum. Because if she can't convince the border patrol that her case is relevant for asylum, or is potentially fits the category for an asylum-seeker, then she is immediately sent home and she's just lost everything. And now is going back to the violence that she was facing.

But what happens is now she has to face these folks, and with the Remain in Mexico policy, what happened almost all the time was she'd say, "I don't feel safe in Mexico because I'm worried that I'm going to be a victim of violence. And we need to have our case heard in the United States." And almost always the officer's believed her, but she still was forced to stay Mexico because of the way the asylum law is written.

So she's sent back to Mexico to wait for her case where she is in fact raped and kidnapped. Now, in traditional philosophy discussions, no one would be happy with this. But the focus of what's not fine with it would be a whole series of human rights abuses. And what I want to say is, I'm not denying human rights abuses are happening, I'm just saying there's so much more going on there. You have certain global structures that make it that she had to escape in the first place and had nowhere to go. You have sexism that targets women and doesn't take them seriously. You have epistemic oppression, in the sense that we presume immigrants are lying.

And so, all of those things are off the table, and I think that's a huge problem that those are off the table because those are immigration injustices too. And I don't think we should just say, "Well, obviously those are wrong, but what are we supposed to do?" No, part of the immigration injustices are all of those oppressions working in that woman's life, and how they don't work on other people's lives.

Christiane: I think another problem that maybe philosophers don't pay a lot of attention to, or that, certainly, I didn't know this word before I read your book. So you write a lot about-

Allison Wolf: Derivatization

Christiane Wisehart: ... derivatization. Thank you. Can you say that again?

Allison Wolf: Sure. Derivatization. I stole it straight from Ann Cahill.

Christiane Wisehart: What is that?

Allison Wolf: I stole it straight from Ann Cahill. So I hope I do her justice. Ann Cahill is a wonderful philosopher. And she uses it originally in the context of ethics of sex. The problem is not that women are objectified, it's that they're derivatized. In other words, the problem isn't that women are mere objects in a sexual relationship, it's that they are merely extensions of whatever men's sexuality is.

And so the idea is that if women want to play the game, that they have to do it according to the men's rules. And the men get to set the rules and women...they're not seen as having their own desires or their own lives. And so what I've suggested is that this is a really useful way of

thinking about how we consider lots of things, but especially, immigrants and the nations who are sending immigrants. We forget that immigrants have their own lives, their own reasons, their own motivations, their own dreams that have nothing to do with us. So if you're talking about, for example, "Oh, they're coming to steal our jobs." That presumes that the only way we can see immigrants is via our own fear of what they might do to us. What happens there is we are unable to see them as full human beings. We don't see anything apart from our own existence.

And the example I give in the book is Jorge Garcia. And this is a man who was in the United States undocumented for decades in Michigan. He has a wife and children and a job. And he has neighbors and a community who loved him and he has a home. He's got a life here for decades. Now, one way, again, to look at this in a traditional way, is it right or wrong to deport him? Does he have a right to be here or not? And I don't think that's actually the interesting question. To me, the question is, "Well, how do we understand his circumstance?" But to understand his circumstance, we have to understand him. And that means we have to see him not as an immigrant, or not as someone undocumented, but as a member of the community. And the moment that the raid was conducted, all that mattered was he was an immigrant with no papers. And that is not an accident. It wasn't that they're like, "Oh, here's a human, and we're going to violate his rights today," though that's what they did. It's that they couldn't even get to the point of seeing him as a human being who might have rights because he's just reduced down, his whole existence was reduced down to papers or no papers.

Christiane: His humanity wasn't taken into account, it was papers or no papers, legal or illegal. And so, part of your book is about why it's so unjust to focus on illegality. So why is that? Why is it unjust to focus on illegality with regard to immigration?

Allison Wolf: And on this, I just have to credit so many people who I think just made it easy for me. So Mendoza did it, Grant Silva did it, Carlos Alberto Sánchez. Those three men worked on different aspects and have worked on different aspects of these questions on illegality, on race and racism and nativism in our immigration system. But when I was reading these three in combination with this lens of oppression, what I realized is that, illegality and legality for that matter, those are all concepts that are founded on oppression itself.

So for example, one aspect of oppression, that a state even has a right, or an ability, or is justified ever in declaring someone legal or illegal. In other words, there's a whole history in political philosophy that I certainly don't have to remind anybody of about the nature of sovereignty and the importance of sovereignty. But that entire discussion of sovereignty itself came out of a very racist, colonial period, that is very much reflected in our political philosophical ideas. Why does a nation need sovereignty? To keep other people from interfering in what they're doing. But which nations get sovereignty? It's never the nations of the Global South.

So it's not sovereignty that nations have, it's a thing that specific nations have to be able to go to keep other people out of their business, but they have no problem going into of other people's business. So to even have a concept that a state can create a set of regulations that declare humans legal or illegal, itself is based already on a colonialist racist concept.

The second is that, the laws, the literal laws of citizenship in the United States have from the very beginning specified that citizenship is dependent on whiteness. So part of the idea of saying someone is able to be part of the community in the United States or not, whatever you want to call that is immediately about reinforcing whiteness and protecting whiteness, and who gets to be white and who doesn't get to be white and all of that, that entails.

The third thing that I think is really interesting, and it goes with the derivatization stuff we were just talking about, is what I learned from Carlos Alberto Sánchez's work, which is, that when you make someone illegal, whatever that means, because again, it is an incoherent term anyway, you have literally kicked them out of society. I mean, even criminals are still part of society. So if you're saying to someone, "You're not even a criminal. There's no place for you." Then again, you've just erased humanity in such a way, and it's not that you've objectified people. You have derivatized them. You have said, "You know what? I've decided that this is my vision of a citizen, and you don't fit it, that's it, but we're of course, we are perfectly able to use you for whatever we need you to do." Like make sure I can go to Whole Foods and buy lettuce that's nice and washed and organic for \$3.

Christiane: Again, one of the things that I appreciated about your book is that you named these things that I think I kind of knew were there, but never really thought about. And it's like, once you shift your perspective, you realize how obvious the problem is. And how you write about the United States separation policy kind of functioned that way for me too, because when I first heard about the United States separation policy for immigrants coming from Central America, which was that, "If you come with your kids, we are taking your kids away from you." That's basically it.

I, like many other United States citizens thought that that was incredibly cruel. Cruelty is there, but that's maybe not the best way to look at it or the best lens to frame it. So what makes family separation policy so unjust in the United States?

Allison Wolf: If you actually look what cruelty is, there are certain aspects of it that are not present. In other words, cruelty is very much about individuals and other individuals. It's very hard to talk about policies being cruel. But again, it's sort of like the rights approach, if you focus on cruelty, then it's really easy to make the bad apples argument, which by the way, we heard all the time. That it's about this border patrol agent who went rogue or this particular politician. But this is so much worse because of its systemic nature. This was done expressly to create a system that if you were from Central America, in particular, that coming to the United States would be such an evil experience for you, that you won't come or that you will be punished for having done so.

The one that surprised me the most that I didn't realize at all, this was the one that I actually had to stop writing for a week just to recover myself, was when I realized that this was expressly targeted at women and children. This was precisely because people are upset that the pattern which used to be men come, and we can come and exploit them in our fields and in our factories, but their families stayed there, we'll make that deal.

It's explicit that they wanted to deter women from coming here with this policy, because they thought that women would never allow this to happen to their children and this would prevent entire families from migrating. And so this was, to me, what makes this policy so awful was how it consciously and purposely, not only exploited various systems of oppression like sexism and colonialism and racism and classism that were all in place, but then specifically, tried to worsen them as a deterrent. People were conscious about oppression and they used it. And to me, that is so much worse than cruelty.

And again, when we focused on cruelty, by focusing all of our attention there, we were looking for the mean people. And we missed the whole bigger thing that was going on, which is that, we are making oppression worse on purpose to stop people from coming to the country.

Christiane: So why do you care about this issue?

Allison Wolf: Well, I'm big on emotions actually, and I'm just going to admit it. I just get emotionally pulled on this topic since 2014 when I heard about the, under Obama, when we heard about the first "surge in unaccompanied minors." And I was listening to the debate, literally I... So before I moved to Columbia, I worked in Iowa at a place called Simpson College for about 15 years. And I'm from Los Angeles. So we'd always drive from Des Moines to Los Angeles every summer, including the summer of 2014. And it was right about this time of year. And that's when this whole thing was happening. And I was just, state after state, listening to this discussion of people upset, but not upset that these poor children are in this situation and all the things. No, they were upset that they're here.

And I got so mad. I thought, "What is wrong with you?" And so frankly, as I say to my students, all good projects for me start with anger and this one did too. I was angry. And the more I learned it, the more I got angry. And anger fueled me for a long time because I'm just like, "This is so wrong. Is so wrong." And I was trying for myself to figure out why do I care so much? What is so wrong about it? Why am I not happy with it? And it took me years to write the book precisely because I was reading this philosophy book and I'm like, "Damn, it's still angry. That doesn't explain the anger.

And until I figured out really, "Well, what's wrong with it?" "Oh, it's oppression. It's everywhere. Oppression is everywhere and we're not calling immigration and justice a presence of oppression. We're calling it something else. So that's kind of what happened in the intellectual part. But as I went through the project, I have to say, I care so much more than I ever thought I would. And I think part of it is I'm learning a lot more stories. I've met a lot of immigrants over the years, and now I've since become one. And so I think now I just see, in some sense, some aspects of the fruit of what I have been suggesting which is, when you humanize people, when you get to know people, then you feel a lot for them.

But the other thing is, and they'll say this really explicitly, I am Jewish. I am very proud of being Jewish. And immigration in Judaism and Jewish ethics is very prominent. On the one hand, you

have just pure history of Jews in the United States. There's no Jew that I've ever met or heard of who's Native American to the United States. Jews have all of the opportunities that we have, literally everywhere in the world because we were, or were not allowed to immigrate to different countries.

So I've come to feel a debt, a historical recognition of that, of the luck that in antisemitic times, if we were living in a different time, at a different place, and we know this because it's happened. It could have been me needing to run with my family. So I feel like the least I can do is to try to... One person can't fix oppression. That's the nature of oppression. We have to work together. We have to have coalitions. We have to have social action and political action, but one person can do their part to make it aware of oppression that they're not seeing so as to help motivate that kind of collective action.

And I also think that, at least in the United States, I don't know if this has been your experience, but I think we use the excuse of, I alone can't fix it too often to do nothing. The fact that I can't fix something doesn't mean that I can do nothing about it. And I feel like we all have some talent or strength or ability that we can do something about this. So for me, it's become a very personal issue, and not just a topic of research.

Christiane: Well, I'm glad that you stumbled upon it. Really enjoyed the book. So thank you for it.

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