

Printed October 24, 2009 12:27am AEDT

Are people-smugglers agents of freedom?

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Tim Soutphommasane | October 24, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

Do people-smugglers represent the lowest form of human life or are they agents of freedom who deliver asylum-seekers from places they can no longer call their home?

THE Prime Minister is certainly in no doubt about this matter. Recent events have prompted Kevin Rudd to affirm his condemnation of people smugglers as "vile" opportunists who "represent the absolute scum of the earth" and "should rot in hell".

We should be suspicious whenever prime ministers -- and not mere demagogues -- speak in such unqualified terms. In this case, it is a little odd that Rudd should do so when his government has signalled a more humane policy towards asylum-seekers.

Yet many Australians will concur with the PM's strident tone.

People-smuggling subverts efforts by national governments to provide an orderly humanitarian response to refugees. It is a multibillion-dollar business for criminal networks across the world, and one frequently conducted with little regard for the safety of asylum-seekers. For example, people-smugglers operating in Indonesia have been known to overload boats or dupe people into boarding unseaworthy vessels, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Still, it seems crude, if not erroneous, to cast all people-smugglers as despicable villains. Not everyone involved in the activity is a member of a sophisticated multinational criminal ring. As researcher Sue Hoffman has noted, people-smuggling syndicates are just as likely to be loose networks of people linked by ethnic or familial ties; many resemble mom-and-pop operations.

Moreover, there will be occasions when the ends justify the means. Consider the equivalent of people-smugglers who operated in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. Must we regard the gentile neighbours who helped Jews avoid Auschwitz as vile scum of the earth? The question about the moral standing of people-smuggling is perhaps derivative of a more fundamental one. Our answer depends ultimately on whether we grant asylum-seekers not so much refuge as a claim for solidarity.

As American philosopher Richard Rorty points out, it is the defining quality of the liberal impulse to believe that we must do all we can to end human suffering and humiliation. At the same time, our sense of solidarity is strongest when we can regard someone as "one of us". The problem is that asylum-seekers are more likely to be regarded, to some degree unavoidably, as the very opposite: as "one of them".

Hard political questions aside, the asylum-seeker problem presents a moral test for a liberal society.

Contrary to cosmopolitan fashion, moral progress need not involve taking utopian steps towards becoming fully fledged members of the human race, and nothing more.

The true mark of progress involves us retaining our particular identities but understanding that on occasions what sets us apart from others is not as important as our similarities: namely, our shared capacity to experience pain and suffering. This, as Rorty reminds us, concerns the ability to think of people otherwise different from ourselves as nonetheless within the range of "us". Where we are capable of such imagination, the morality of people-smuggling starts to appear less black and white and decidedly more grey.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address: philosophercolumn@gmail.com

Copyright 2009 News Limited. All times AEDT (GMT + 11).