

THE HAIMESIAN PRINCIPLE OF THE LEAST

An addition to the Haimesian System

Final edition - September 22, 2026

This work develops the proposition that treatment of those regarded as least, most outcast, least favored, or least able to compel fair treatment can reveal the breadth and sincerity of moral concern. It combines two mechanisms rather than choosing between them: the outer boundary of concern and power asymmetry.

Scope note. This is presented as a Haimesian System principle. Supporting thinkers and public officials are included as predecessors, parallels, or applications; the text distinguishes resemblance from identity rather than attributing the full Haimesian formulation to them.

1. Thesis

A person, group, institution, city, state, country, or society often reveals its moral reach most clearly at the point where concern is hardest to extend: toward the person or class regarded as least, most outcast, least favored, or least able to compel fair treatment.

The central claim is not that the socially "least" person has lesser human worth. The claim is almost the reverse. Social position, popularity, usefulness, power, innocence, and human worth are different things. The principle asks whether legitimate aid, protection, dignity, fairness, and consideration survive when favorable status disappears.

Formal formulation: Subject to relevant differences in responsibility, need, risk, and justice, treatment of those occupying the least-favored or least-powerful position is unusually revealing of the breadth and sincerity of moral concern, because it tests both how far concern extends and whether it survives when reciprocity, status, usefulness, fear, or expected reward provide less incentive to behave well.

2. Definitions

Least. "Least" is relational rather than intrinsic. It means the person or class placed at the lowest relevant position for the question being examined: least favored, least protected, least powerful, least socially valued, worst off, or furthest outside ordinary sympathy.

Outer boundary of concern. The furthest point to which a person's or group's willingness to recognize legitimate needs, dignity, fairness, or aid still extends.

Power asymmetry. A condition in which one party has substantially less capacity to reward, retaliate, resist, confer status, or enforce fair treatment than another.

Relevant difference. A morally pertinent fact that can justify unequal treatment - for example, a real difference in responsibility, safety risk, need, consent, or entitlement. Bias and prejudice are not relevant differences merely because they are socially common.

Aid. Aid is not limited to charity. It can include protection, access, accommodation, restraint from exploitation, fair procedure, recognition of rights, or practical assistance. The principle does not require granting every request.

3. Genealogy and the Candy Thought Experiment

The initial intuition can be illustrated with a piece of candy placed exactly in the middle of a table seating four people. Assume all four can reach it, none has a special medical need, none owns it, and no prior rule assigns it. The candy therefore occupies the weakest possible ownership position: no participant has a superior claim.

What happens next can reveal dispositions. One person may seize it immediately. Another may ask whether anyone wants it. Another may propose dividing it. Another may offer it away. The point is not that one response automatically proves virtue. The point is that behavior becomes informative when possession is available without an established superior claim.

Weakness in the original experiment. Candy cannot be wronged. It has no interests, dignity, or agency. The experiment therefore tests conduct toward *weak claims* more directly than conduct toward weak persons.

Stronger variant. Give each person an equal entitlement, then have one participant temporarily leave the room. The absent person retains a legitimate share but temporarily loses the ability to watch, resist, retaliate, or object. Preserving that share now tests whether a legitimate claim is respected after enforcement power has weakened.

This exposes the two mechanisms that the final principle combines: **(1) boundary** - does concern reach the least-favored position? and **(2) asymmetry** - does fair treatment persist when the weaker party cannot easily compel it?

4. Strongest Allies and Intellectual Predecessors

These thinkers do not all state the Haimesian principle in full. They supply distinct components that converge upon its terrain. Their own formulations are stated as precisely as the sources allow, and the Haimesian synthesis is kept distinct from them.

In their own formulations. Gandhi asks the decision-maker to recall "the poorest and the weakest" person. Rawls requires inequalities to work to "the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society." Parfit states the Priority View compactly: "Benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are." Mandela writes that a nation should be judged not by its highest citizens but its lowest. These formulations are not interchangeable, but together they establish a substantial intellectual lineage for treating the bottom, weakest, or worst-off position as morally significant. [1][2][3][8]

Mahatma Gandhi - the authentic "Talisman" is stronger evidence than the disputed slogan

The famous sentence "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members" is widely attributed to Gandhi, but a reliable primary source for that exact sentence has not been established. That uncertainty should be preserved rather than hidden. A much stronger Gandhi connection is his well-attested 1948 "Talisman," which instructs a decision-maker to recall the poorest and weakest person and ask whether the contemplated action will benefit that person and restore control over life and destiny. [1]

That is extremely close to the present project. Gandhi uses the condition of the weakest person as a **decision test**. The Haimesian principle changes the direction of inquiry: instead of only asking whether a contemplated policy helps the weakest, it also asks what the treatment of that person reveals about the moral reach of the decision-maker. Gandhi therefore provides a strong predecessor without needing the disputed national-greatness quotation.

John Rawls - the least advantaged as an institutional test

Rawls's Difference Principle requires social and economic inequalities to work to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, subject to equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity. [2] Rawls therefore refuses to judge an economic arrangement solely by its average prosperity or by the gains of those at the top. The position of those at the bottom matters structurally.

The overlap is substantial but not complete. Rawls offers a principle for the justice of basic institutions. The Haimesian proposal is also **diagnostic**: treatment of the least is evidence about the moral breadth of the treating person or institution. Rawls tells us where just institutions must look; the Haimesian principle asks what looking - or refusing to look - tells us about moral character.

Derek Parfit - priority to benefits received by the worse off

Parfit's Priority View holds that benefiting people matters more, morally, the worse off those people are. [3] It does not make equality itself the ultimate reason; rather, the worse absolute position of the recipient increases the moral importance of a benefit.

This supports the thought that the lowest position cannot be treated as morally incidental. The difference is again diagnostic: Parfit assigns special weight to benefits; the Haimesian principle asks what willingness to extend appropriate consideration to the least reveals about the giver, institution, or society.

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum - needs, capabilities, and the error of equal resources alone

The capability approach shifts attention from resources alone to what people are actually able to do and be. A person with a disability may require different resources to reach substantive opportunity; formally equal shares can therefore leave real capability profoundly unequal. Nussbaum further develops a dignity-based account of central human capabilities and treats government as having urgent responsibilities concerning entrenched injustice. [4]

This strengthens an important limitation of the Principle of the Least: fairness cannot always mean identical treatment. If the least-positioned person faces barriers that others do not, equal inputs may preserve rather than remedy disadvantage. The relevant question is whether differences in treatment track legitimate differences in need and agency rather than prejudice, convenience, or contempt.

Eva Feder Kittay - dependency is part of human life, not an exception to humanity

Kittay's work on equality, dignity, disability, frailty, and dependency challenges moral and political theories that quietly assume an independent, able-bodied adult as the normal citizen. [5] Dependency is not simply a failure state outside the social contract; human beings pass through dependency and often rely on care relationships.

For the Haimesian argument, this matters because "least power" must not be confused with "least worth." A dependent person may have little bargaining power while retaining full moral significance. Kittay therefore guards the principle against a paternalistic interpretation.

Simone Weil - attention to affliction as a condition of justice

Weil makes attention to affliction central to justice and neighbor-love. Her ethics asks the self to suspend its own centrality so that the afflicted other can be seen rather than absorbed into prestige, collective habit, or self-interest. [6]

This aligns with the boundary mechanism. The outcast is precisely the person easiest not to see. A willingness to attend to that person tests whether concern survives the social forces that normally make some lives vivid and others invisible.

Immanuel Kant - conduct toward the powerless can expose character

Kant did not ground animal protection in animal rights as contemporary theorists often do, but his indirect-duty argument is revealing: he maintained that cruelty toward animals can damage the humanity of the agent and make the person harder in dealings with other human beings. [7]

That is close to the diagnostic structure of the Haimesian principle. Where the weaker party cannot enforce reciprocal treatment, the stronger party's conduct can reveal something about the stronger party. Kant's specific account of animal status is contestable; the useful connection is the character-revealing function of treatment under extreme asymmetry.

Nelson Mandela - the lowest citizens and the prison test

Mandela wrote that a nation should not be judged by its highest citizens but its lowest ones. The United Nations prominently uses this formulation in presenting the Nelson Mandela Rules for the humane treatment of prisoners. [8]

Prison provides a severe test of the principle. A prisoner may be culpable and punishment may be justified; nevertheless, incarceration creates profound power asymmetry. The state controls movement, living conditions, access to services, and much of daily life. The test is therefore not whether the prisoner is innocent, but whether dignity and legitimate protections persist after the prisoner loses ordinary power and status.

5. State Actors and Civic Applications

The recurrence of the idea in public policy does not prove the principle. It does show that officials in different jurisdictions repeatedly reach for the same moral intuition when dealing with vulnerable populations.

Actor / forum	Issue that prompted the principle	Why it matters here
Nic Dakin, UK House of Commons, 18 June 2014	Closure of the Independent Living Fund and disabled people's independence. Dakin invoked the Gandhi-attributed weakest-members line, then stressed that the recipients were not weak as persons. [9]	A useful distinction between low institutional power and low human worth.
Michael Savage, Canadian House of Commons, 19 Oct. 2006	Federal program cuts. Savage used the Gandhi-attributed line and argued that government should not abandon the least advantaged. He repeated the idea in Finance Committee hearings days later. [10]	Directly treats the least advantaged as a test of public responsibility.
Senators Steve O'Ban and Mark Miloscia, Washington State, SB 6166 (2018)	Child sex trafficking through online advertisements. The bill placed the Gandhi-attributed sentence in its legislative findings before calling trafficked minors one of the state's most vulnerable populations. [11]	The intuition was written into proposed statutory text, not merely used rhetorically in a speech.

Actor / forum	Issue that prompted the principle	Why it matters here
Stuart Young, Trinidad and Tobago House of Representatives, 28 Feb. 2020	Debate on violence against minors. As Minister of National Security, Young invoked the weakest-members formulation and applied it to children, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups. [12]	Connects national moral judgment to protection from violence.
Sue Lines, Australian Senate, 26 June 2013	Public housing, homelessness, domestic violence, children, and low-income households. Lines acknowledged uncertain authorship while defending the substance of the saying. [13]	A particularly careful state use because it separates the proposition from disputed attribution.
Hubert Humphrey; quoted by President Jimmy Carter, 14 May 1980	Humphrey's moral test of government focused on children, the elderly, the sick, the needy, and the unemployed; Carter used it at the inauguration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [14]	Independent convergence that does not depend on Gandhi at all.

State use of Matthew 25:40 - "the least of these"

The biblical formulation has also entered official presidential speech. President George W. Bush told the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast in 2002 that Jesus' admonition to care for "the least of these" was, for many Hispanic Americans, a way of life. [15] President Barack Obama used the same language repeatedly: at an Easter Prayer Breakfast, in a Georgetown conversation on poverty, and while welcoming Pope Francis, where he connected the measure of individuals and society with treatment of the poor and marginalized rather than wealth, power, station, or celebrity. [16]

These examples are not offered as endorsements of the surrounding policies or politicians. Their relevance is narrower: elected executives found Matthew's "least" language apt when describing moral obligations toward people in need or at society's margins.

6. Rival Explanations and Competing Moral Tests

A complete argument must ask whether treatment of the least is really special, or merely one among many moral tests.

- **Reciprocity test:** Perhaps good character is better measured by how fairly someone treats equals. Reply: treatment among equals remains important, but reciprocal power can conceal whether fairness survives when enforcement weakens.
- **Universal-rule test:** Perhaps the proper measure is whether one follows the same rule for everyone. Reply: identical rules can preserve substantive disadvantage when people have materially different needs or capabilities.
- **Aggregate-welfare test:** Perhaps the morally best society is simply the one producing the most total welfare. Reply: a high aggregate can coexist with extreme abandonment of a small vulnerable class. The Principle of the Least is designed to detect precisely that blind spot.
- **Desert test:** Perhaps aid should track virtue or contribution rather than low status. Reply: desert can legitimately matter in some contexts, but it does not erase baseline duties against cruelty, exploitation,

arbitrary exclusion, or denial of basic dignity.

7. Strongest Objections

Objection 1 - The least may be dangerous or culpable. A murderer in prison may possess little power relative to the state. A socially rejected person may have been rejected for serious wrongdoing. Why should their treatment measure goodness?

Response. The principle does not say the least is always right, innocent, or entitled to equal freedom. It asks whether legitimate treatment survives after culpability is accounted for. Punishment can be deserved while torture remains wrong; restraint can be necessary while humiliation remains gratuitous.

Objection 2 - "Least" is multidimensional. The poorest person may be politically powerful; the unpopular person may be wealthy; the disabled person may be highly respected.

Response. "Least" must always be indexed to the relevant dimension. The principle is strongest when the dimension is named: least protected in law, least socially favored, least economically secure, least able to enforce a claim, or worst off with respect to a particular good.

Objection 3 - Good treatment may be performative. A government may treat one symbolic vulnerable group well for reputation while neglecting others.

Response. One case is evidence, not a total moral verdict. The test grows stronger when concern is consistent across low-status groups, persists without publicity, and survives political or personal cost.

Objection 4 - Aid can become paternalism. The stronger party may "help" while denying agency.

Response. Aid must be constrained by dignity, consent where possible, and respect for agency. Nussbaum and Kittay are especially important here: concern for vulnerability cannot become an excuse to treat the vulnerable as objects.

Objection 5 - Resources are finite. A society cannot maximize every need of every vulnerable person.

Response. The principle is not a command to allocate everything to whoever is worst off. It is primarily a test of moral reach and sincerity, operating within legitimate scarcity, competing duties, and proportionality.

8. Necessary Difference: What the Haimesian Principle Adds

The principle does not merely rename Rawls, Parfit, Gandhi, Mandela, or Matthew 25. Its distinct contribution is the synthesis of **two independent evidential mechanisms**:

Boundary mechanism. Treatment of the least-favored person reveals how far concern extends. Kindness toward the already loved, useful, respected, or prestigious does not identify the outer edge of concern.

Asymmetry mechanism. Treatment of the least-powerful person reveals whether concern survives when the recipient has less ability to reward, punish, resist, or confer advantage. As strategic incentives shrink, voluntary fairness may become more diagnostic of genuine moral regard.

A person can be low-status without being powerless, or powerless without being despised. Where the two coincide, the test becomes especially severe. This two-axis model is the clearest necessary difference from the predecessor views surveyed above.

9. Concessions

The principle should not claim that treatment of the least is the *only* measure of moral character, that one observed act settles the character of an entire nation, or that the least-positioned person automatically receives priority over every competing claim.

Nor should it define a person as "least" in human worth. The phrase is intentionally about a relational position. Indeed, one of the principle's purposes is to expose the error of treating low social position as low human value.

Finally, motives remain difficult to infer. Even a powerful person may act generously for reputation, law, religion, self-image, or future advantage. The asymmetry mechanism therefore yields **stronger evidence** of moral regard, not infallible access to motive.

10. Limits, Falsifiability, and Scope

The theory would be weakened if systematic evidence showed that treatment of low-power or low-status parties had no meaningful relationship to broader prosocial behavior, fairness, restraint, or institutional justice - or if treatment of favored equals consistently predicted moral conduct just as well across contexts.

Open questions remain: How should "least" be measured when several dimensions conflict? When does deserved punishment cease to be a relevant difference and become an excuse for cruelty? How should the principle operate under severe scarcity? Can the diagnostic claim be empirically tested across persons and institutions without smuggling moral judgments into the measurement itself?

These limits define the principle's proper scope. They also make it falsifiable rather than insulating it from evidence: empirical work can strengthen, narrow, or challenge its diagnostic claims.

Final Formulation

The Haimesian Principle of the Least: Subject to legitimate differences in responsibility, need, risk, and justice, the treatment of those occupying the least-favored or least-powerful relevant position provides an unusually revealing measure of the breadth and sincerity of moral concern. It reveals how far concern extends toward those easiest to disregard, and whether fairness, aid, dignity, and protection survive when status, usefulness, reciprocity, fear, or expected reward provide less incentive to offer them.

Corollary: Low status, dependency, culpability, or lack of power does not by itself imply lesser human worth. The principle does not require indiscriminate aid; it requires that legitimate moral consideration not disappear merely because its recipient is outcast, weak in bargaining power, or unable to compel it.

The deepest practical question becomes: **When a person stands at the furthest edge of your concern and possesses little ability to demand better treatment, what remains of your willingness to treat**

that person justly?

Matthew 25:40

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

The verse offers a concise religious expression of the same moral reversal: the person occupying the position of "least" becomes the person through whom treatment itself is morally judged. The philosophical argument above does not depend on accepting the verse as revelation; within a Christian frame, however, it provides an especially direct closing expression of the principle.

Sources and Research Notes

[1] Gandhi's Talisman. M.K. Gandhi resource archive, citing Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase*, Vol. II (1958), p. 65. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ggqouts1.php> . A 2020 *Gandhi Marg* article also cautions that the familiar "greatness of a nation" animal/weakest formulations are not found in Gandhi's collected works in the forms often quoted.

[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Original Position" supplement on Rawls's Difference Principle; and "John Rawls." <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/difference-principle.html> ; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/>

[3] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Prioritarianism as a Theory of Value," discussion of Derek Parfit's Priority View. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prioritarianism/>

[4] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Capability Approach" and "Disability and Justice," discussing Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/> ; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-justice/>

[5] Eva Feder Kittay, "Equality, Dignity and Disability," Seamus Heaney Lecture on Equality. PhilPapers archive: <https://philpapers.org/archive/KITEDA-2.pdf>

[6] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Simone Weil," discussion of attention, affliction, dignity, force, and justice. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simone-weil/>

[7] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Moral Status of Animals," discussion of Kant's indirect duties regarding animals and character. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/>

[8] United Nations, "Nelson Mandela Rules" and UN presentation on humane treatment of prisoners. https://www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/mandela_rules.shtml

[9] UK House of Commons Hansard, 18 June 2014, Westminster Hall debate on Independent Living Fund recipients, remarks of Nic Dakin MP. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140618/halltext/140618h0001.htm>

[10] House of Commons of Canada, Hansard No. 65, 19 October 2006, remarks of Michael Savage MP; and Standing Committee on Finance evidence, 24 October 2006. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/39-1/house/sitting-65/hansard> ; <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/391/FINA/Evidence/EV2430651/FINAEV40-E.PDF>

[11] Washington State Senate Bill 6166, 65th Legislature, 2018 Regular Session, sponsored by Senators O'Ban and Miloscia. <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2017-18/Htm/Bills/Senate%20Bills/6166.htm>

[12] Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, House debate, 28 February 2020, "Unacceptable Rate of Violence against Minors," remarks of Hon. Stuart Young. <https://www.ttparliament.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/hh20200228.pdf>

[13] Australian Senate debates, 26 June 2013, first speech of Senator Sue Lines. <https://www.openaustralia.org.au/senate/?id=2013-06-26.143.1>

[14] The American Presidency Project, President Jimmy Carter, Department of Health and Human Services inauguration remarks, 14 May 1980, quoting Hubert Humphrey's moral test of government. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/department-health-and-human-services-remarks-inauguration-ceremonies-for-the-department>

[15] George W. Bush White House Archives, National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast, 16 May 2002, referring to Jesus' admonition to care for "the least of these." <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/05/20020516-1.html>

[16] Barack Obama White House Archives: Easter Prayer Breakfast, 7 April 2015; Georgetown poverty conversation, 12 May 2015; Pope Francis arrival ceremony, 23 September 2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/07/remarks-president-and-vice-president-easter-prayer-breakfast> ; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/12/remarks-president-conversation-poverty-georgetown-university/> ; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/23/remarks-president-obama-and-his-holiness-pope-francis-arrival-ceremony>

[17] Matthew 25:40 wording used here corresponds to the New International Version. Bible Gateway confirms the wording and identifies NIV copyright information. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A40&version=NIV>

Attribution caution. This work deliberately treats the familiar "greatness of a nation / weakest members" line as widely attributed rather than securely authenticated as Gandhi's wording. Gandhi's Talisman supplies a much better documented, closely related precedent.