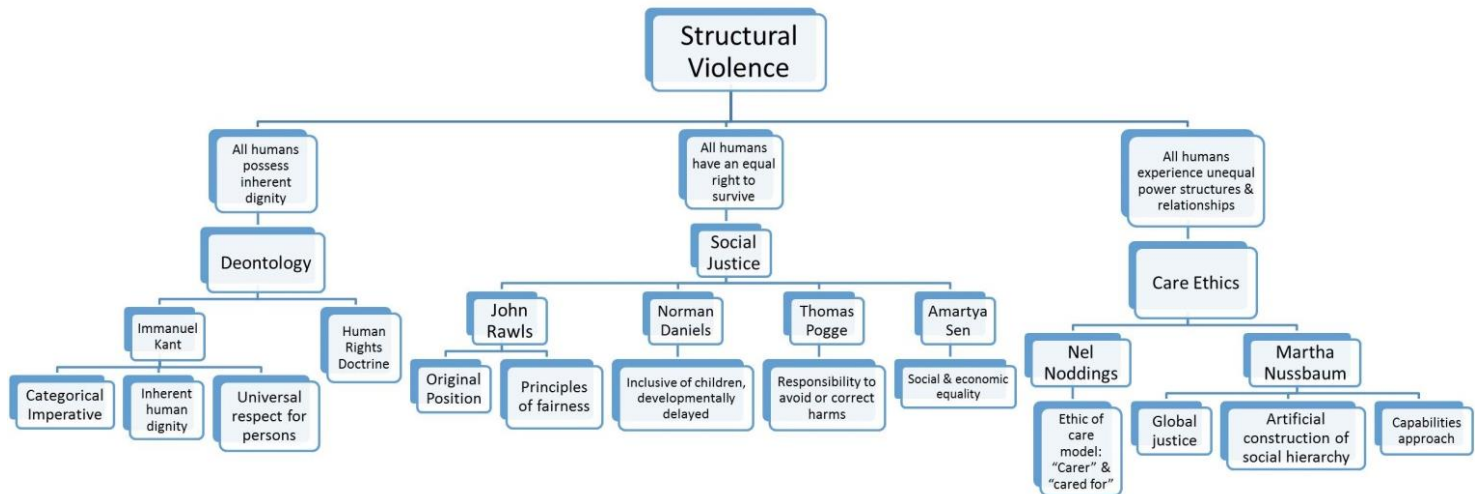


# “Creating a dynamic ethical framework for public health policy: Paul Farmer’s theory of structural violence”

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The above model represents how principles of Deontology, Care Ethics and Social Justice theories can be extracted from Paul Farmer’s explanation of structural violence. Although Farmer does not claim to operate from any ethical theories, interpreting his theory through a philosophical lens reveals a dynamic framework to analyze and create equitable public health policy.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The second tier of the model reflects major themes from Farmer’s work that I have interpreted as Principles to guide “Farmer Ethics”: 1) All humans possess inherent human dignity, 2) All humans have an equal right to survive and 3) All humans experience unequal power structures and relationships. The tiers that fall below these three Principles represent the theories of ethics that support each—Deontology, Social Justice and Care Ethics. Each of these is further delineated into authors and associated principles or rules as the tiers descend. This model is to serve simply as a visual aid and loose logic model that illustrates the connection between these theories. Please see below for more detailed explanation.

**Deontology:** Deontology stems from ethical theory developed by Immanuel Kant.<sup>4</sup> Farmer emphasizes universal human dignity reminiscent of Kant’s categorical imperative, which morally forbids anyone from treating another person as a means to an end.<sup>4</sup> Kant’s ethics are based on intention, not consequence, which is where Farmer breaks away from being a true Deontologist—Farmer focuses extensively on acting with intention to produce outcomes that reduce inequality. Nevertheless, Farmer’s emphasis on universal human dignity and protection from harm is very similar to Kant and the human rights rhetoric inspired by his work.<sup>4,5</sup> Farmer advocates for health care as a human right and securing social and economic rights for the poor.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Farmer criticizes public health policy that rationalizes inequality as proper utilization of scarce resources, arguing: “Human rights violations are not accidents... Social inequalities have always been used to deny some people status as fully human.”<sup>1</sup> Reminiscent of Kantian Deontology, Farmer calls physicians to act on their responsibility—or duty—to protect their patients, particularly the most vulnerable.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

**Social Justice:** Social justice is the only theory of ethics that Farmer explicitly applies. In *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer notes, “Without a social justice component, medical ethics risks becoming yet another strategy for managing inequality”.<sup>1</sup> (This also highlights a strong reason for public health’s need for “Farmer Ethics” and continued expansion for public health ethics as an academic field.) Farmer pushes for a broader social justice agenda in ways similar to John Rawls’ social justice theory based on the Original Position thought experiment.<sup>1,2,3,6</sup> Farmer often asks for readers to imagine what it would be like to be “sick, poor, hopeless, and alone,” a thought experiment tactic to illustrate reasons to be concerned with equitable access to care.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Rawls’s Original Position provides a social baseline that encourages all stakeholders to desire justice and fairness.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Farmer’s Principle that asserts “all humans have an equal right to survive” (see above model) corresponds to Rawls’ principles of fairness. Like Rawls, Farmer demands high standards of protection for particularly vulnerable groups, such as the poor, political refugees, and prisoners.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

However, Farmer is merely similar to Rawls, not identical to his theory of social justice. Rawls is critiqued by Norman Daniels who, more closely aligned with Farmer, reveals a flaw in Rawls’s thought experiment.<sup>6</sup> The Original Position prioritizes rationality and the ability to make autonomous decisions, excluding individuals without full reasoning capacity, such as children or the developmentally delayed.<sup>6</sup> Both Daniels and Farmer argue that normative capabilities should not determine the extent to which a person’s human dignity is respected.<sup>1</sup>

Another social justice theorist, Thomas Pogge, also complements “Farmer Ethics” with his emphasis on individual and systematic responsibility for injustice.<sup>7,8</sup> Pogge declares, “We should design an institutional order so that it prioritizes the alleviation of those medical conditions it substantially contributes to.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Farmer employs case studies to demonstrate instances of more powerful countries devastating the economy of developing nations, arguing that responsible parties should attempt to correct harm caused and avoid causing future harm.

Lastly, Farmer’s emphasis on economic and social rights to secure health for the poor draws from the work of Amartya Sen.<sup>9</sup>

**Care Ethics:** Elements of Care Ethics can be seen in Farmer’s development of ethical physician-patient relationships and understanding of broader power structures. Care Ethics is generally associated with feminist moral philosophers Nel Noddings and Martha Nussbaum (although Care Ethics should not be considered a strictly feminist theory)<sup>10,11</sup> Care-based ethics give property to humane treatment owed to all human beings, as does Farmer.<sup>1,10,11</sup> Care Ethics can be linked to Farmer’s acknowledgement of the way inequalities of power affect political, social, and economic relationships an individual experiences.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Care ethics, according to Nel Noddings, includes two distinctive roles—the “Carer” and the “Cared for”<sup>10</sup> Analogously, Farmer notes that health professionals in their role as “carers” must fulfill their duty to protect their patients, particularly the most vulnerable.

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