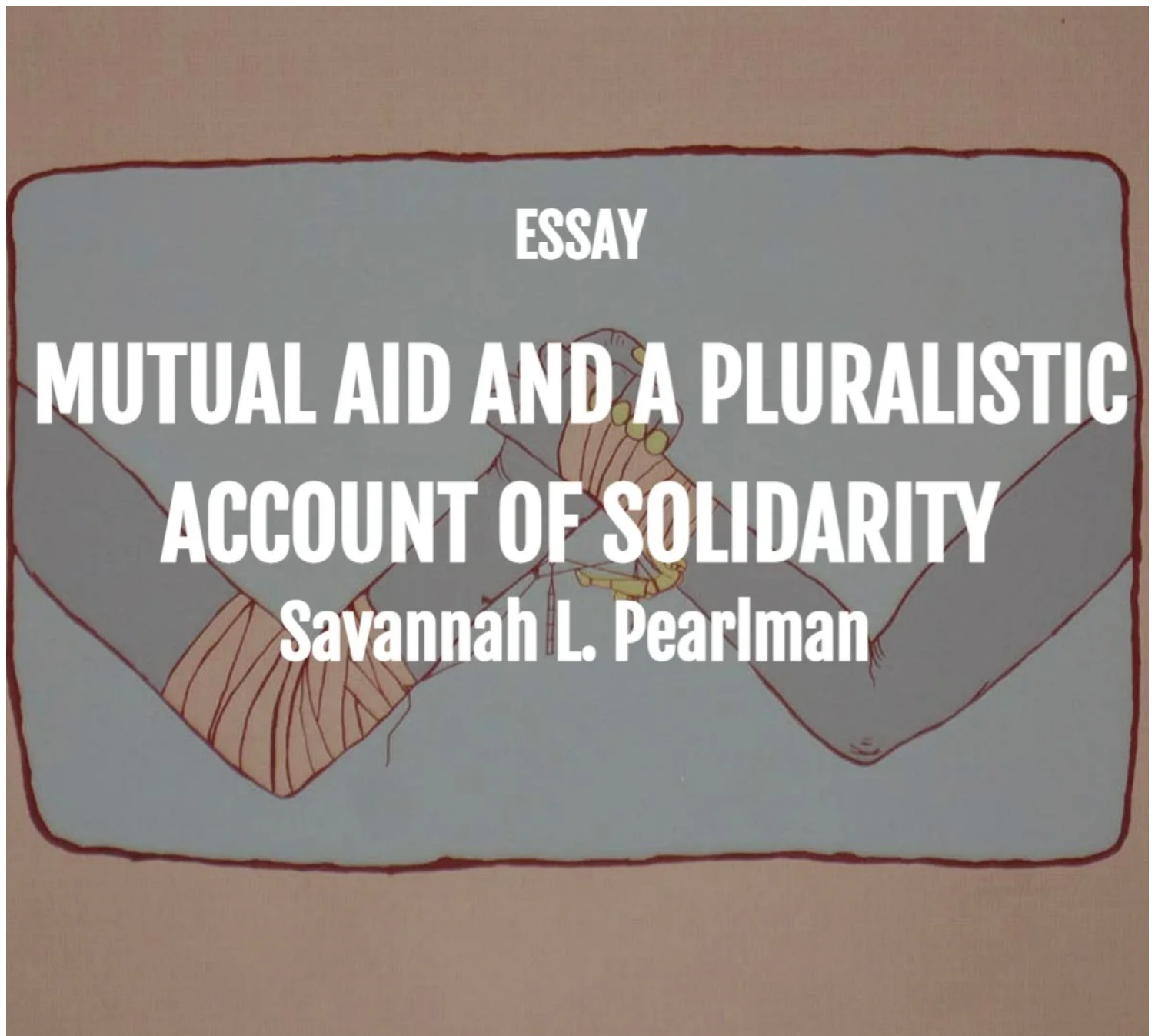


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"MUTUAL AID AND A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT OF
SOLIDARITY": AN ESSAY BY SAVANNAH L.
PEARLMAN



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"The test of solidarity, the mark of a cooperative commonwealth, is mutual aid – the recognition of our fellow citizens, all of them, as men and women toward whom we have obligations by virtue of the fellowship." Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics*

The philosophical literature on solidarity is, unsurprisingly, set on answering two conceptual questions. First, what does solidarity consist of? And second, what does *being in solidarity* require?

While it is largely agreed upon that solidarity is a kind of unity among persons, this agreement is short-lived – for if solidarity involves unity, what kind of unity is this? That is, does solidarity coalesce around shared *identity* or simply *fellow-feeling*? Shared *action* or *fate*? Or is solidarity merely a matter of *commitment* to a particular cause to *achieve* certain ends? Below, I look to examples of Mutual Aid to reject a piece-meal model of solidarity (where solidarity is this but not that) in favor of a more pluralistic account. The notion of solidarity need not be constrained, all or nothing, by a specific strain of interpretation. Instead, we should recognize that solidarity is a matter of variety and degree.

The concept of Mutual Aid has become well-known for its catchphrase: "Solidarity Not Charity". Mutual Aid involves the exchange of goods, services, and social support between members of a particular community, sometimes formed as a result of shared identity or geographic locale. Whereas charity is perceived to be transactional and externally sourced (from outsiders towards individuals or communities with need), Mutual Aid is a tactic of internal community assistance, which emphasizes collective care and sometimes encourages (but does not require) reciprocity.

Although Mutual Aid is often used to describe contemporary community-based social movements, Peter Kropotkin's 1902 monograph, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, lays out a long history of interpersonal cooperation and symbiotic interdependence spanning dozens of cultures and several millennia. In addition to barn raisings and collective childcare schemes of old, contemporary Mutual Aid includes deeds that range from the spontaneous upkeep of little free pantries to organized workshops on tenants' rights.

Contemporary positions on Mutual Aid reflect the hard lessons learned during the COVID pandemic. In his 2020 book, *Mutual Aid*, Dean Spade describes Mutual Aid as "survival work", writing:

We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems – like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people – for the things we need... In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid – where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable – is a radical act.

In a recent post on the blog of the American Philosophical Association, Jennifer Gammage highlights Mutual Aid's anarchical history, a feature notably absent from Spade's account:

While not all of those practicing mutual aid share Kropotkin's strong views of social democracy and/or Marxist politics, most people involved in mutual aid projects seek to decenter the role of individuals and eliminate social hierarchies, and most practice consensus-based decision-making and horizontal organizing. These tactics allow for radical action beyond the protest site or the picket line by teaching those of us living with the hangover of individualistic notions of the subject to relate to others in new ways that allow for reciprocal changes in beliefs and/or behaviors to be understood as a collective strength rather than a personal injury.

In contrast to Spade's interpretation, then, Gammage notes that most Mutual Aid communities aim beyond the goal of mere survival and seek instead a future in which they can flourish.

Mutual Aid is conceptually rich fodder for analysing the notion of solidarity: it is a multi-faceted paradigm from which we can identify different strains that the notion of solidarity may embody. From this, I argue that it would be unwise to contort or restrict our conception of solidarity as one that covers only one or some of these solidaristic scenarios. Instead, we should understand solidarity as a rich, pluralistic notion, which can take many forms.

Solidarity as Shared Identity

One understanding of solidarity is that it describes the sense of *unity* that arises when group members coalesce around some shared identity. We can think of this variety of solidarity as the one that roots the feminist appeal to "sisterhood" and the French nationalist demand for "fraternité!"

Identity-based notions of solidarity have, however, been called into question due to worries about social ontology and essentialism. Who counts as having membership "in the group"? Does identity-based solidarity require all members of the group to share specific, inherent traits, and, if so, might these criteria wrongly exclude others who ought to be included? While these concerns are well-founded and ought to be a continued topic of discussion, there can be no doubt that shared identity (whatever that amounts to) can give rise to solidarity.

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Consider the Black Panthers' commitment to Mutual Aid. Founded in 1966, the Black Panther Party coalesced around *Black identity* as a means of self-preservation under oppression. The group originated in Oakland, California, where rampant racism and police brutality meant that merely *being Black* put one at risk for bodily harm. As a result, having the same racial identity – an identity which subjected oneself to unjust interpersonal, institutional, and structural oppression – became a basis for solidarity via Mutual Aid.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Black Panthers launched several “Community Survival Programs.” The United States National Archives reports that the Free Breakfast Program served breakfast to children every school day morning, while the Free Food Program distributed 10,000 bags of groceries to Oakland community members. These programs were meant to assist Black families in particular – those families who were often discriminated against or could not access government benefits were targeted as those who ought to receive the benefits of identity-based Mutual Aid.

There is undeniably something legitimate about one’s marginalized identity constituting a basis for solidarity under these non-ideal social circumstances. When one’s identity – in this case, one’s racialization – singles a person out as a target for discrimination and unjust treatment, identity-oriented Mutual Aid is meant to mark that person as someone whose circumstance deserves remediation.

And yet, there is also something odd about the notion that merely *sharing an identity feature* with someone else is a sufficient basis for solidarity. Perhaps, as Sally Scholz (2008) has argued, the point is not that those in solidarity often share certain identity features, but rather that the moral content of solidarity is motivated in response to unjust political circumstances.

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Political solidarity – the kind of solidarity that exists in opposition to injustice – certainly makes explanatory sense as the motivating force behind the Black Panther’s “Community Survival Programs”, compared with shared identity features alone. As Tommie Shelby writes in his book, *We Who Are Dark*:

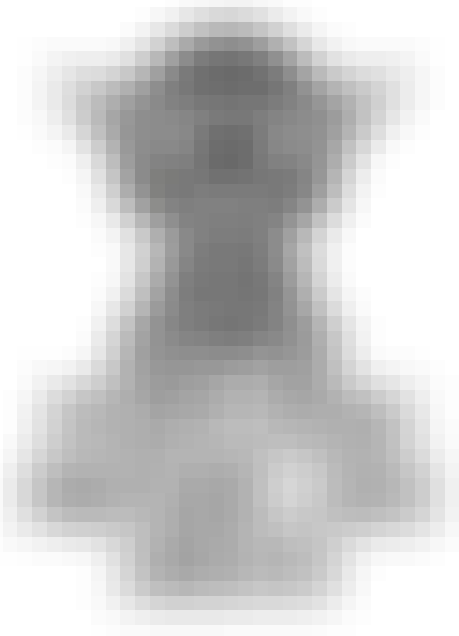
Traditionally, [black solidarity] has a dual basis, one positive and the other negative. The shared racial identity and cultural heritage of African Americans provide a foundation for black unity, and those in the ethnoracial community of African descent often seek to preserve and celebrate the group’s cultural distinctiveness through group loyalty, community intercourse, ritual and collective self-organization. On the negative side, the black experience of unjust treatment and discrimination has helped create strong bonds of identification. A common history of oppression and vulnerability to racism has engendered a need for political solidarity and group self-reliance, if only as a matter of defense in a non-ideal world.

Marginalized identity in opposition to oppressive forces plays a powerful role in generating solidaristic scenarios. And yet, it is equally clear that shared identity features are not the *only* basis for solidarity, nor does it necessarily imply solidarity. For instance, time, locality, and context matters: A

Black waitress in New Orleans may not feel solidarity with a Black tradeswoman in Ghana simply because they're both Black women. Since solidarity neither requires nor reduces to shared identity, what else could it mean to be *in solidarity*?

Solidarity as Fate-Sharing

Another interpretation is the notion that solidarity involves individuals with not only shared identity or political interests, but also a collective fate. As such, solidarity is the sense that a group might be emotionally bonded together by the notion that their fates are somehow tied. The sense of unity arises from the feeling that the group has a joint future which all involved must work together to secure.



While much of the Mutual Aid movement has typically focused on local aid distribution, solidarity as fate-sharing calls for a global example. The Movement for Black Lives – a coalition of 50 groups, including the Black Lives Matter network and other prominent Black organizations – has actively traded advice and social support with Palestinian activists (see, for example, Hansi Lo Wang's 2021 article, "The Complicated History Behind BLM's Solidarity With The Pro-Palestinian Movement"). A 2015 video created by activist groups the Dream Defenders, Black Youth Project 100, and the Institute for Middle East Understanding sets images of the Palestinian struggle side-by-side with the Black Lives Matter movement against police violence in

the United States, while the narrator repeats: "When I see them, I see us". Many Black activists view themselves as fate-sharing with Palestinian activists, bound together in the struggle for liberation within one inextricably linked network of oppression.

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Solidarity in this case transcends both race and locale, reaching across communities who perceive themselves to be in fellowship. This iteration of solidarity is a reflection not only of self-identification (between two communities whose members perceive themselves to be experiencing a structurally parallel variety of oppression), but also of fate-sharing – your victory is my victory, your loss is my loss. To quote Martin Luther King Jr., "No one is free unless we are all free".

Here solidarity is framed as an emotional bond between group members or even between groups in similar circumstances, emerging as a result of their collective decision to stand in opposition against unjust social conditions. However, the moral content of solidarity can extend beyond those who experience political marginalization. In the following section, I suggest that joint experience, regardless of one's role in unjust social conditions, can inspire no less legitimate and normatively valuable forms of solidarity.

Solidarity as Fellow-Feeling

While some philosophers (such as Avery Kolers) reject the idea that fellow-feeling is either necessary or sufficient for solidarity, and others (such as Sally Scholz) worry that equating solidarity with attitudes like mere camaraderie – a positive feeling of association – drains it of its moral content, I contend that an interpersonal exchange about common experiences can be a sufficient basis for solidarity.

Recall that while it is most often associated with providing pro-bono goods and services, Mutual Aid also emphasizes care and the exchange of social support. In this sense, support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, grief groups, or even support networks for single parents are expressions of Mutual Aid. In groups such as these, the group member is able to express their own challenges or anxieties with others who can experience emotional reciprocity and provide validation.

Again, solidarity of this sort is engendered by a common struggle and a sense that you are “in it together,” but one need not be a member of a socially or politically marginalized group, or take any particular set of actions, in order to be in solidarity with other group members.

In these cases, fellow-feeling is not reducible to mere camaraderie. Those within the group have a sharper understanding of what it is to face a particular set of challenges than non-member outsiders, e.g., the challenge of resisting an alcoholic impulse for someone in an Alcoholics Anonymous group. There is something substantial in relating one's experience to others who can not only sympathize or even emphasize, but truly *understand*, because they *have been there themselves*.

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Having one fundamental shared experience can knit social solidarity between the most diverse persons – those who may otherwise have nothing in common. Consider a case where the grief group is for parents who have lost children. Those within this group may feel a profound sense of solidarity, even by merely being in the presence of others who experienced the same trauma that they, themselves, have. These cases of solidarity can thus reasonably be construed as a robust form of fellow-feeling.

Solidarity as Action

Critics will reply that having fellow-feeling – even of this robust sort – is not sufficient for solidarity. Solidarity, they argue, requires *action*. For, is one really *in solidarity* with another if they do not *act* as such? These philosophers will contend that solidarity is instantiated by appropriate action.

With this in mind, imagine a scenario in which a local boy has recently been diagnosed with leukaemia. After taking the recommended regimen of chemotherapy, he has lost his hair and become very self-conscious. Now imagine that unbeknownst to him, his basketball coach has organized the whole team to shave their own heads as an act of solidarity.

This example gives rise to an interesting question: Can an act of solidarity be merely symbolic? I do not see any reason to exclude those acts that cannot change or alter the negative circumstance, such as this boy's leukaemia. After all, the value of solidarity is in the interpersonal exchange of support, not in its ability to produce positive consequences.

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In his 2019 article, "Solidarity, Fate-Sharing, and Community", Michael Zhao contends that being in solidarity sometimes entails participating in acts of deprivation. The motivation behind such acts, Zhao contends, is that solidarity includes "the thought that, in certain ways and to certain extents, what happens to part of the group should happen to the entire group. If certain members of my group are undergoing something bad, and I cannot make it so that they no longer undergo that thing, then I should undergo it with them". Participating in solidarity is one normatively valuable response to a friend's undesirable circumstance, especially if one cannot change those circumstances. The team cannot prevent their teammate's leukaemia, but they *can* shave their own heads as an act of solidarity.

Some philosophers – Andrea Sangiovanni and Michael Bratman, for example – suggest that solidarity requires *collective* action, taken *with others*. This suggestion has the odd corollary that a pair might be too small of a unit to be in solidarity with each other. If merely one of the teammates shaved his head, rather than the team together, would that not also be an act of solidarity? Perhaps there is something about the team *as a unit*, participating *together*, which provides added heft. In that case, the team acting in solidarity together has some degree of solidarity over and above the acts of the individuals themselves. Even if this explains the goings on here, it seems wrong to suggest that a single teammate cannot act in solidarity with the ill boy in the event that the other teammates opt out. A relationship between two people is sufficient for an interpersonal exchange, which I see as the base unit of solidarity.

Solidarity as Commitment to Achieving Ends

Still, there is a question about whether the acts, themselves, are a show of solidarity. Scholz has argued that the expression of solidarity is centred not on the acts, specifically, but in the act of uniting towards a particular *end*. She distinguishes between different types of solidarity within the sphere of political solidarity:

The cause or goal of political solidarity is broadly construed as justice or liberation, but social movements like political solidarity usually organize around a more concrete purpose as well. We can call these two layers of the goal or ends of political solidarity the formative and substantive ends. The formative ends, liberation or justice, serve as a sort of hopeful possibility for what collective action might accomplish if all the barriers that sustain oppression or injustice are removed. The substantive goals include all those specific barriers—such as gaining a just wage or fair working conditions, ending racial or domestic violence, removing the obstacles to full citizenship imposed on some people, bringing an end to the cultural or social exclusion felt by others, and so on (from *Political Solidarity* (2008)).

Kolers has criticized this teleological view in *A Moral Theory of Solidarity*, writing that the focus on ends over means overlooks the *moral value* of solidarity: “the meaning and justifying features of solidarity depend not on what you hope to achieve, but on which side you are on”.

Imagine that a local Mutual Aid group is committed to spending the weekend finding a replacement for an elderly woman’s broken oven. They call all over town and check all of the usual places, without luck. The value is in the fact that they *committed to help* the elderly woman, even though they are unsuccessful in attaining the end of a new oven. They committed themselves to *being on her side*. Accomplishing the goal is desirable, but it is not the primary focus of solidarity.

Conflicting Principles

Some will argue that a pluralistic account of solidarity is too unwieldy. Why juggle multiple, robust notions of solidarity of various degrees and kind when we can capture *most* of the scenarios described here with an action-based or political account of solidarity? These critics will contend that we can explain away the remaining cases (those that do not fit the mould) as morally irrelevant, or too thin to amount to solidarity.

In response, I reply that a pluralistic account of solidarity mirrors our ordinary use of the term – we do not tend to understand solidarity as a clean-cut phenomenon, distinctly this and not that. There is no one set of necessary and sufficient conditions for solidarity, and it is precisely this quality that makes

solidarity so philosophically interesting. Individuals in solidarity with one another often hold differing priorities or values, and being open to a pluralistic account more accurately reflects this variation.

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There is also something rather objectionable about policing what really “counts” as solidarity and what doesn’t when we return to the level of practical engagement. What it means to commit to a cause or act in appropriate ways will be importantly relative to those involved and their situations.

For example, members of a Mutual Aid group may seek to be in solidarity with the local homeless population, whose camp is in danger of being disbanded by the local government. Some members may wish to express solidarity in political ways by making policy change or enacting local protections. Others may seek to establish social solidarity with the homeless population by setting up a coffee station, providing tarps, or warm clothing. Still others may camp out in their own tents, to demonstrate their commitment *with* the homeless *against* government intervention. And those without the time and resources to act might still be *angry* on their behalf, resenting injustices against their poorest neighbours.

Solidarity poses an interesting conceptual challenge for the philosopher, being at once vague and specific. Just what grounds solidarity or which factors act as the glue which hold members together will vary among different persons and contexts. With the help of some examples from the field of Mutual Aid, I have sought to identify a few of the many ways we might join in or express our solidarity with others.

Savannah Pearlman is an Associate Instructor at Indiana University – Bloomington, where she is completing her PhD in Philosophy. After becoming interested in Mutual Aid during the COVID pandemic, she authored an article on the topic for the American Philosophical Association Blog. She is also guest-editing a special issue of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal on Mutual Aid with Mark Lance (Georgetown) to be published this Spring.

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