

## Cosmopolitanism: A Critique

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*Cosmopolitanism, originally a doctrine of world citizenship, has come in recent political philosophy to mean simply an ethical outlook in which every human being is equally an object of moral concern. However ethical cosmopolitans slide from this moral truism to deny, controversially, that as agents we have special duties of limited scope. Political communities create relations of reciprocity between their citizens and pursue projects that reflect culturally specific values and beliefs, generating special duties among fellow-members. Strong cosmopolitanism would require the creation of a world government, and this could only be an imperialist project in which existing cultural differences were either nullified or privatised.*

As always the first question to ask is what exactly we mean when we use the term cosmopolitanism. It derives, plainly, from the Greek *kosmopolites*, a citizen of the world, and so we could define it briefly as an ideology, or if you prefer doctrine, of world citizenship. Developed mainly by the Stoics, cosmopolitanism first became popular as part and parcel of the ideology of the Roman Empire, and the underlying question I want to raise is whether cosmopolitanism proper is also implicitly imperialist – whether you can detach it from the belief that there should be a single world government, and moreover a government controlled by people of virtue, as the original Stoic conception of cosmopolitanism apparently required.

If you read most modern commentators, by contrast, you will be told that cosmopolitanism is simply an ethical doctrine with no direct political implications. Here, for instance, is Charles Beitz:

Cosmopolitanism need not make any assumptions at all about the best political structure for international affairs; whether there

should be an overarching, global political organization, and if so, how authority should be divided between the global organization and its subordinate political elements, is properly understood as a problem for normative political science rather than for political philosophy itself. Indeed, cosmopolitanism is consistent with a conception of the world in which states constitute the principal forms of human social and political organization. (Beitz 1998: 831)

I think Beitz's view here is representative of the way cosmopolitanism is understood in contemporary political philosophy. But is it a tenable view? Is it really possible to disconnect moral and political questions in the way that Beitz supposes? That is the issue I want to address.

Considered simply as an ethical doctrine, cosmopolitanism has a curiously elusive character. Its adherents seem to switch, often in the space of a single sentence, from saying something that is virtually platitudinous to saying something that is quite controversial, and I want to suggest a brief diagnosis of how this comes about. The platitudinous element in cosmopolitanism is the claim that every human being has equal moral worth, or in a different formulation that each person is equally an object of moral concern. What does this mean? One way of getting to it is to consider the various bad things that can happen to people, and then to say that it is equally bad if A suffers to degree X as it is if B suffers to the same degree, no matter who A and B are, where they live, which community they belong to, etc. In other words, a world in which there is a starving peasant in Ethiopia is as bad as a world in which there is a starving peasant in Poland, all else being equal. However this uncontroversial claim does not entail anything very straightforward about what particular *agents* should do in response to the harm. We do not yet know whether I as an individual, or any group I belong to, has more reason or less to help the Ethiopian than the Pole. There is a gap between our moral assessments of states of affairs and the reasons we have for acting in relation to those states of affairs.

A simple example may help to bring this out. Suppose a child goes missing and there are fears for her safety. This is equally bad no matter whose child it is, and there are some agents, for instance the police, who should devote equal resources to finding the child in all cases. But there are other agents whose reasons for action will depend on their relationship to the child. If the child is mine, then I have a strong reason, indeed an overwhelming reason, to devote all my time and energy to finding her. If the child comes from my village, then I have a stronger

reason to contribute to the search than I would have in the case of a child from another community. Of course if I have information that might help find that distant child, then I should give it to the police at once. It's not that I lack any responsibilities to the distant child. But nearly everyone thinks that I have a much greater responsibility to my own child, or to one I am connected to in some other way. The important point is that this is perfectly consistent with the view that it is equally bad, equally a matter of moral concern, when any child goes missing.

This is the point that ethical cosmopolitans miss when they slide from saying that every human being has equal moral worth to saying that *therefore* we are required to treat all human beings equally, in the sense that we have the same duties to each. This, as the missing child example shows, is simply a *non sequitur*. Yet it plays an important part in cosmopolitan rhetoric.

Some cosmopolitans accept the point when presented with examples like that of the missing children. But they then go on to deny that the point holds when it is extended beyond the family to communities such as the nation. In other words, they accept that equal moral worth is consistent with acknowledging special duties to family members, but deny that it is consistent with acknowledging special duties to fellow-nationals. Now I agree that the analogy between family and nation is not self-evident – that whereas in the missing child case one can rely on strong and deeply held intuitions about special responsibilities, one has to work harder in the national case. One has to give reasons why membership of a national community creates the kind of relationship that translates into special reasons for action. I do not want to set these out at length here. But very briefly, and on the assumption that we are talking about a political community whose members share a common national identity, I think there are reasons of at least two kinds.

First, communities of this kind involve a kind of institutionalised reciprocity. Their members contribute their labour and/or their money to a common pool, which is then drawn upon by those with special needs or in particular circumstances such as old age. This cannot work unless the members acknowledge that they have a responsibility to contribute which is more than just the responsibility they might have to help people everywhere. Of course, contributions can be enforced to some extent – taxation is compulsory, there can be a work requirement attached to receipt of benefits – but enforcement only works against a background in which people generally acknowledge an obligation to contribute.

Second, political communities of the sort I am considering typically engage in collective projects that reflect the cultural beliefs and values of the members, and devote part of their resources to these projects. They make choices about the right balance between work and leisure, they protect the natural environment or the historic built environment to varying degrees, they support religious establishments and so forth. So each political community gives its members a different mix of benefits. Suppose now that I am a member of Community A and I look across to people in Community B and notice that they lack certain goods that I enjoy – they are economically poorer, for instance, or have fewer environmental goods than members of my community. Does this give me any reason to help them? Not if the differences I observe are the result of political decisions made and pursued over time. Of course I am presenting a simplified picture here, but what I am trying to illustrate is the way that political organisation impacts on moral responsibilities. If we live in a world made up of separate political communities, each of which constitutes itself to a greater or lesser extent as an institutionalised scheme of reciprocity, and each of which pursues a different mix of values embodied in its public culture, we cannot assume that we have the same duties to people everywhere regardless of membership.

This anti-cosmopolitan stance does not mean that we have no global duties at all. But it means that our duties have to be differentiated: we owe more to some than to others. If we look at the problem from the other end, and consider the position of someone with a claim to be helped – someone who has unfulfilled needs, say – then the question to ask is who has a special reason to provide that help. Only very rarely indeed will the answer be: everyone equally. In nearly every case we can think of, there will be some agent with special responsibilities to the person in need, whether this is on account of communal ties, or a history of interaction between the two, or a particular capacity to help, or some other feature that marks the agent out.

Would-be cosmopolitans sometimes resist the picture I have been painting by pointing to the way in which people across the globe are interconnected, each person acting in ways that have an impact on others. The anti-cosmopolitan picture, they argue, relies on presenting political communities as hermetically sealed units, a view that might have been approximately true some time in the past, but no longer is. But the key question here is about the kind of interconnection we are looking at. If world citizenship really existed, not just as an idea but as a reality, then

people everywhere would have legitimate claims to a certain kind of equal treatment; they could legitimately demand that the cosmopolis protect their equal rights as citizens in the way that states today have an obligation to protect their own citizens' equal rights. But what we have now is a patchwork of connections, some economic, some cultural, some political, each giving rise to different kinds of ethical responsibility. For instance, where agent A trades with agent B – the agents might be individuals, or enterprises, or entire political communities – then A has an obligation to conduct the trade fairly, not to defraud or exploit B, and so forth. But A does not on that account alone acquire a special responsibility to help B in other ways – responsibilities of that kind would have a different source.

Cosmopolitanism, I have been suggesting, comes in two very different forms. Its weak ethical version – formulated in terms of a principle of equal moral worth or equal moral concern – can be accepted by almost anybody barring a few racists and other bigots. But the strong form, which requires that as agents we should acknowledge equal duties or equal responsibilities to everyone in the world without exception, only makes sense in combination with a political demand for global government. If we were truly world citizens, then equal responsibilities would certainly follow.

I suggested at the beginning that there might be a connection between cosmopolitanism and imperialism, and I want in closing to say a little more about this. Global government makes sense, I believe, only if we envisage a cultural convergence between different societies, or alternatively the wholesale privatisation of culture, by which I mean that cultural activities and projects would no longer be pursued by political means but in voluntary groups and associations. Clearly, there already exist tendencies within liberal societies in this direction, and so one can imagine a kind of benign liberal imperialism whereby governments could federate with one another on the basis that each would provide the same basic package of rights and opportunities to its people, but would not engage in cultural projects that others might disapprove of. This is not an unattractive vision in itself, and one might regard the European Union as the forerunner of such a development. What it excludes, obviously, is the possibility that there exist deep cultural differences between and among societies which the members of each find valuable, and which they want to see protected by political means. If that is the case, then the best kind of world, for humans, is one in which many autonomous



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political communities co-exist peacefully, without any attempt to create a uniform set of rights and duties such as cosmopolitans demand.

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