



## CHAPTER

## 14 A Cosmopolitanism of Connections

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### Abstract

Cosmopolitanism as a privileged style of consumerism is not only inaccessible to most—an old complaint that, as we see here, haunts new cosmopolitanisms—but, as Craig Calhoun explains, it is also incapable of engaging with the ethical and political issues that the new global interconnectedness brings in its wake. And cosmopolitanism as a universalistic ethics which asserts our basic moral obligation to other humans can confront differences only as problems. Calhoun asks, shouldn't differences be seen as opportunities? For him, cosmopolitanisms are plural and particular, “communities of fate” bound together by particular sets of historically grounded relationships and institutions. The key to a robust cosmopolitanism, Calhoun contends, is attention to the specificity of social and historical connectedness.

**Keywords:** [ethics](#), [connectedness](#), [global interconnectedness ethics](#), [connectedness](#), [global interconnectedness](#)

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Cosmopolitanism is an ancient idea, typically traced back to Diogenes of Sinope, who aspired to be a citizen of the world partly to avoid the laws and social norms of any particular place. Instead, he affirmed, one should simply live in accordance with nature. He dressed badly, slept in a tub, and advocated public sex and unrestrained belching. The citizens of Athens thought the self-declared citizen of the world was simply uncivilized.

Fortunately, one does not have to be uncivilized to be a cosmopolitan. Diogenes gave us a term that we translate as “citizenship of the world,” but we use it less to describe a political status, like citizenship in a nation-state, than a sense of appreciation and responsibility for the whole world. Some people follow Diogenes in imagining that advancing cosmopolitanism is a matter of shedding local cultures because they are all restrictive. Others, however, more usefully imagine cosmopolitanism as something we achieve in and through culture, on the basis of resources provided to us about the history of civilizations, the teachings of religions, and the intellectual contributions of scholars. This is the perspective I advance here. We do not have to think of cosmopolitanism in terms of the lowest common denominators of human nature. We can think of it in terms of the highest aspirations of human culture. This is what makes it appropriate as a theme for this occasion, which celebrates communication and collaboration between countries embodied precisely in an institution of learning.

Here is the moral of my story, stated up front: learning to be an effective and responsible citizen of the world—a cosmopolitan—is not simply a matter of absorbing universal truth. It is a matter of learning to

navigate cultural difference and differences of basic values and orientations—and doing so with respect for people who navigate those differences less.

p. 190 The idea of being a citizen of the world has gone through many permutations since Diogenes. It was important to the Stoic philosophers of Rome and has surfaced, not always under precisely the same name, in a range of empires and world religions. It flourished among Arab philosophers in Al-Andalus and other Europeans in both the age of Shakespeare and that of the more rationalist Enlightenment.

More recently, the term *cosmopolitan* has come into fashion since the late 1990s. It is the topic of best-selling books and numerous academic anthologies. This reflects three different stimuli.

First, there was the fall of Soviet communism. This encouraged high hopes for the possibility of achieving a new global order. Cosmopolitanism became an important name for this agenda, encompassing human rights, the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations, hopes for the spread of democracy, and attempts to strengthen the United Nations and other global institutions. There was more unalloyed optimism for this agenda in the 1990s. Terrorism, wars, financial collapse, and the evident weakness of our global tools for dealing with these events have made the 2010s a more sobering time. We worry not just whether the global order will be just, but whether it will in fact win out over chaos. But hope remains widespread that it will be possible to realize higher standards of international, cosmopolitan justice.

Second, there has been growing recognition that people around the world are joined in a common community of fate. Should massive climate change occur, it will affect the whole world. Even without climate change, there are serious ecological dangers that create transnational and even global risks, and infectious diseases that do not respect national or cultural boundaries. Or consider the implication of nuclear weapons (or other weapons of mass destruction). They make warfare something the whole world has to worry about, not just a problem for combatant countries. Cosmopolitanism here names the need for transnational collaboration to confront these challenges—and the expectation that it will emerge because people of many countries share in the sense of need.

p. 191 Third, globalization calls forth cosmopolitanism. Economic integration, migration, the spread of world religions, the capacity of electronic media to transcend distance—all spread awareness that no nation stands alone. Contact among cultures enriches knowledge and encourages appreciation of different kinds of artistic beauty and expression. Globalization, however, is not simply a single phenomenon spreading everywhere. It is a host of different patterns of interconnection. No market is simply the universal market. Great religions seek the universal in different ways. Globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon but is shaped by histories of empire and war, trade relations that long predate modern capitalism, and efforts to build better relations among countries. Discussions of cosmopolitanism or world citizenship need to take this into account. The learning offered in a great university needs to provide students with resources for understanding these different situations and perspectives.

An orientation to other cultures and to all the world's people is ethically and intellectually important. In cosmopolitanism we can see an embrace of human diversity that enriches life by incorporating knowledge and creativity from other cultures. Equally we can see the sense of an underlying commonality because all are human, and as the Roman playwright Terence put it, "nothing human is alien to me." This can extend into an idea of responsibility that each of us should care about others distant from us. How we approach this makes a great deal of difference.

It is easy to be too casual about cosmopolitanism because the word is used to mean too many different things. I suggest three ways that cosmopolitanism can be discussed. The first, I suggest, reduces cosmopolitanism to style—a style associated especially with global elites. Possibly attractive, and in many ways empowering for those who learn it, this is mainly a distraction from more basic ethical, social, and political concerns. The second approaches cosmopolitanism as a universalistic ethics based on ideas like human rights that stress the equivalence of every human being. Valuable to theories of justice, this is nonetheless a limited perspective because it abstracts persons too much from social and cultural contexts and often blinds us to the implications of material inequality. The third approach sees cosmopolitanism not only in equivalence but in connections. It emphasizes that although we are growing more connected, the patterns of our connections are varied and incomplete, not universal. It reminds us that we engage the larger world through our specific localities, nations, religions, and cultures, not by escaping them.

“Cosmopolitan” is a compliment for the suave and debonair. It is praise for those who know how to pick out an Italian suit, who read the *Economist* and *Financial Times*, who can discuss the merits of Nobel Prize-winning novelists from Egypt, Portugal, or Nigeria. It is a term of self-congratulation for those who can eat Asian food with chopsticks, Ethiopian or Indian food with fingers, and pick the right fork for each course at an elegant European banquet. In both popular culture and political science, cosmopolitanism often figures as an attitude, a style, a personal commitment; this is not necessarily political or even ethical. Contrast the significance of the phrases “citizen of the world” and “man of the world.” The former may hint at humanitarian commitments or leadership in global business or diplomacy. The latter is as likely to be about expanded tolerance for ethical lapses—or simply about more fashionable clothes.

For many people, cosmopolitanism denotes a world that is simply an object of consumption, there for individuals’ pleasure. “The goal of cosmopolitanism is self-expression and self-realization,” writes feminist lawyer Kimberly Yuracko. “Cosmopolitanism presents individuals with a wide range of options; they choose the one that will bring them the most pleasure and gratification.”<sup>1</sup> This consumerist perspective on cosmopolitanism is widespread.

In the world’s global cities, and even in many of its small towns, certain forms of cosmopolitan diversity appear ubiquitous. Certainly Chinese food is now a global cuisine—both in a generic form that exists especially as a global cuisine and in more “authentic” regional versions prepared for cultivated global palates. And one can buy Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing. Local taste cultures that were once more closed and insular have opened up. Samosas are now English food, just as pizza is American and Indonesian curry is Dutch. Even where the hint of the exotic (and the uniformity of the local) is stronger, one can eat internationally—Mexican food in Norway, Ethiopian cuisine in Italy. Consumerist cosmopolitanism can even extend to marriage choices. “Cosmopolitan” is the first category in the advertisements posted by would-be husbands seeking brides (and vice versa) in the *Sunday Times of India*.<sup>2</sup>

p. 193 As many people use the word, *cosmopolitanism* suggests a personal attitude or virtue that can be assumed without change in basic political or economic structures—which are external to the individual. Much of its appeal comes from the notion that cosmopolitanism (a version of ethical goodness) can be achieved without such deeper structural change. But cosmopolitanism is not simply a free-floating cultural taste, equally accessible to everyone; it is not just a personal attitude or a political choice, although it can inform these. Cosmopolitanism is also a matter of material conditions that are very unequally distributed. What seems like free individual choice is often made possible by capital—social and cultural as well as economic. Take the slogan in Sony’s recent computer advertisements: “C is for Choice, Color, and Cosmopolitanism.” Surely C is also for Capital.<sup>3</sup>

Take Singapore’s president, who spoke of the island’s “cosmopolitans” and “heartlanders.” After his speech, a local blogger responded sarcastically: “Many Heartlanders think that to become a Cosmo, you need a lot of money. Nothing could be further from the truth. Being a Cosmo is essentially a state of mind, and has nothing to do with that overdraft that keeps you awake at night.”<sup>4</sup> He continued with mock advice on wines and watches, cars and condos. But as blogger Mahesh Krishnaswamy said, “Travel is the true measure of a Cosmo. ‘Been there, done that’ is their motto.” Sadly, he fears his readers are “those of us who haven’t been, primarily because we haven’t a bean.”

In short, cosmopolitanism is not equally available to everyone. Some have more money and get more choices. This is a limit to the consumerist path to global harmony. Beyond this, the dominance of the English language in global discourse privileges native speakers. The influence of Western culture and institutions opens access to some more easily than to others. A disproportionate number of the world’s meeting places are in Europe and America—the United Nations in New York, Paris, Rome, and Geneva; the Bretton Woods institutions in Washington, D.C.; and the academic centers that are not only strongest but also most richly international.

p. 194 The cosmopolitan attitude need not be understood primarily through consumer choices. It is represented also by concern for universal human rights, action in response to humanitarian emergencies in distant countries, and efforts to promote a more just global economy.

Kant is pivotal to the tradition of understanding cosmopolitanism as universalism, relying on a logic of categorical equivalence. For Kant, cosmopolitanism would start with recognizing the rights of all human beings and on this basis set limits on the ambitions of all states. It would extend to a notion of “universal cosmopolitan existence” as “a perfect civil union of mankind.”<sup>5</sup> In the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries, such cosmopolitanism reflected the rise of a new faith in reason and hopes that this would provide a way to overcome conflicts based on more directly religious faiths. Kant’s cosmopolitanism was shaped centrally by concern for peace and justice; engagement or appreciation across lines of cultural difference was not a prominent focus for him. This theme was central to the Enlightenment and has been basic to discussions of cosmopolitanism in political philosophy ever since.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, cosmopolitanism is commonly associated with abstract equivalence, the equal value of human beings considered as individual tokens of a global type: humanity.<sup>7</sup> In religious terms, each human has a soul; in a more secular vocabulary, each has rights. This understanding underwrites most philosophical accounts of ethical universalism. But categorical equivalence among all human beings describes only an abstract whole, not the more complicated and heterogeneous world in which human beings differ for cultural and other reasons, claim identities and forge solidarities and enmities. It underwrites minimal ethical obligations but cannot grasp fully the importance of human embeddedness in culture or social relationships.

Indeed, much recent liberal cosmopolitan thought proceeds as though belonging is a matter of social constraints from which individuals ideally ought to escape or temptations to favoritism they ought to resist. Claims of special loyalty or responsibility to nations, communities, or ethnic groups are subordinated or fall under suspicion of illegitimacy. To claim that one’s self-definition, even one’s specific version of loyalty to humanity, comes through membership in a more particular solidarity is, in Martha Nussbaum’s words, a “morally questionable move of self-definition by a morally irrelevant characteristic.”<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum holds that p. 195 the highest and strongest obligation of each person is owed to humanity as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Her cosmopolitanism is thus about the equivalent value of individuals and the aggregate good of all persons.

For universalists, cosmopolitanism is centrally about how well or poorly we relate to strangers—those we do not know and those outside our political and communal solidarities. A cosmopolitan cares about people to whom he or she does not have a strong personal connection and about the world as a whole. Ethicists like Nussbaum and Anthony Appiah put the stress on orientations to individual action and considerations of justice and equity. From the perspective of justice, there are certainly strong reasons to think that all human beings should be considered equal. Why should an accident of birth—being born in one country any more than being born light-skinned or male—confer any special privilege? Should not those of us who benefit from global trade have obligations to consider whether the products we buy are produced by coerced or child labor? One can approach these ethical issues in narrowly individual ways—for example, by taking care not to buy certain products. Seeking to have a bigger impact requires considering political or at least institutional remedies and changes.

For many who use the term, cosmopolitanism signals a direct connection between the individual and the world as a whole.<sup>10</sup> This may be taken as the basis for an ethics that says each is obligated to all. The implication is that local cultures, nations, and perhaps even religions stand in the way of recognizing the essential equivalence of all human beings. In cosmopolitan discourse, it is thus common to assume that an open, enlarged view of the world must be a matter of transcending strong ties to other people in favor of commitment to humanity as a whole.

Starting from the perspective of abstract equivalence, seeing essential similarities as the main ground for cosmopolitanism tends to make differences appear as potential problems. They may be occasions for tolerance—as members of one religion tolerate adherents to others—but this is hardly a source of cosmopolitan unity. Likewise, nations are often understood by universalistic cosmopolitans as only self-interested sectional loyalties—preferences for one’s own group. Strong cultural loyalties appear as prejudices.<sup>11</sup> But this leaves out at least half the story. For thick or strong cultural loyalties not only join p. 196 people to each other and enable both individual and collective life but also, along with creativity, offer

variety to the world. The development of nations—and the social institutions that organize national societies, including but not limited to government—is also a cosmopolitan achievement. Nations knit together smaller regions and provinces, however imperfectly; some provided structures of assimilation and citizenship for large numbers of immigrants. Likewise, although religions divide human beings, they also offer some of the largest scale and most influential forms of transnational, cosmopolitan solidarity.

## A Cosmopolitanism of Connections

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Instead of grounding cosmopolitanism in the categorical equivalence of human beings, we might ground it in our relationships to each other. An element of this may be incorporated into the notion of a common relationship to God, the creator of all. A similar notion can also be extended to all living things, whose lives would all be extinguished by a cataclysmic environmental tragedy, for example. The unity then lies in the potential of disaster so great it would end all, the mirror image of creation radical enough to create all. Being part of a “community of fate,” with its orientation to a future to be achieved or averted, may be an important bond among diverse people.

Fully grasping the lateral connections humans create with each other requires situating them in history. That is, we might say that connections among people and places (and animals and plants and flowing waters or indeed buildings and machines) are forged not only by external causes like divine creation or fate but also by human action in history. Nations are *not* always the enemies of cosmopolitanism; they are often agencies of integration among different regions, classes, religions, and ethnicities. In this view, humans are joined not just by abstract equivalence but also by the interpersonal relationships and the social institutions—from language to states to religions—that we have created. The capacity for such creation is basic to humanity.<sup>12</sup> Everyone is connected to others and through them to all. But the connections are partial and incomplete, however dense and important they may be. History has connected us in some ways, more to some others than to all. We have the possibility to create a new future but, as Marx put it, not under conditions of our own choosing. What we can create is always shaped by our situation in history. This seems a more robust way to ground cosmopolitan thinking than the universalism of abstract categorical equivalence.

Think of Christianity and Islam—universal religions but also threads of connection across nations and regions, along migration routes, and through common projects of learning. Sometimes cohesion is stressed—we speak of Christendom or the *umma* of Islam. But the great world religions do not resolve differences into simple unity; rather, they provide common languages, sets of aspirations, and occasions for connecting. So too, think of cities, especially the great international cities that bring together travelers on different missions of business or cultural exploration, immigrants, citizens of different backgrounds. These cities connect to each other, not just to their hinterlands; they connect different parts of the world. How many languages are spoken on a daily basis on Manhattan? How many are spoken in Abu Dhabi?

Consider different ways of speaking about the environment. We might stress the equality of all humans and use a notion of equal entitlement to judge the unequal distribution of natural resources. We might stress not that we are the same but that we are in the same boat, and focus on the risks we all share from degradation or catastrophic destruction of that environment. But we might also locate ourselves in relationships forged with or through the environment. A single river flowing hundreds of miles may feed fishing villages and challenge sport fishermen, irrigate farmland, water grassy lawns, provide drinking water to a city, and drive a turbine. It may entertain kayakers and raise the value of property with scenic views. Both transportation and pollution may connect people at different points. Both equality and community of fate are real issues. But deeper understanding and practical solutions alike depend on grasping the ways in which people are related to each other through their dependencies on the river. Moreover, each of those ways of depending on the river has a history, is shaped by culture and habit, and is informed by a specific location. Again, think of bodies of water—the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean. The world’s regions are not just landmasses or places of common culture. They are also the different lands touched by common bodies of water that provide connections and mutual influence.

We are connected, but incompletely. We have responsibilities because of our connections, because we are affected by and affect others, not just because of abstract similarities. At the level of both individuals and culture more broadly, we are transformed by the historical processes of social action and interaction; these give us capacities for mutual understanding. These capacities are always in some degree specific to the

cultural and historical circumstances in which they are forged; they are not simply universal. We should not confuse the experience of roaming the world and appreciating its constitutive differences with grasping it as a whole.

The dominant strands of cosmopolitan theorizing draw heavily on the experience of frequent travelers, roaming freely across borders and sometimes creating expatriate communities where businesspeople, academics, and aid workers of several nationalities mix in formerly imperial cities. The theories sometimes also make reference to less privileged border crossers. Bolivian musicians play on street corners around Europe. Filipina housekeepers serve locals and expatriates alike in Southeast Asia. Pakistanis build skyscrapers in the Persian Gulf. Sikhs drive taxis in Toronto and New York. Mexicans migrate to Spain and the United States. Migrants are agents of interconnection in a global world and sources of multicultural diversity in societies that cannot readily understand themselves as homogeneous even if some of their members—or their governments—want to. They are often cosmopolitan in the sense of having loyalties and connections that cross national borders, but for them globalization is not the abstract universalism of cosmopolitan theory. It is not that globalization is only for the rich, or powerful, or privileged; rather, it is experienced very differently with different resources. Of course globalization also affects those who do not travel, or travel far, and we need to ask what responsibilities educated cosmopolitans have toward them.

Cosmopolitanism needs to be explored in terms of webs of specific connections that position us in the world—from friendship and kinship through national states or religions to markets and global institutions. These are not just nested at different scales; they cross-cut each other, and it is good that they do so, for differences on one dimension are met by connections on another. A central part of what a university experience does is open up new connections. It does this literally by introducing people to each other—students and professors alike. It does this also by introducing students to great products of different cultural traditions. This is a basis for analyzing both what they have in common and how they differ. It also does this by providing students with intellectual and cultural resources for confronting future challenges. These are skills, habits, perspectives—an attitude of openness and a confidence in building new relationships—as well as the accumulated knowledge of science and scholarship. Learning entails a capacity to translate and a willingness to be transformed. This is a matter not so much of shedding culture as of finding new resources in culture.

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## Notes

- 1 Kimberly Yuracko, *Perfectionism and Contemporary Feminist Values* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 91; also see Jon Binnie and Beverley Skeggs, “Cosmopolitan Knowledge and the Production and Consumption of Sexualised Space: Manchester’s Gay Village,” 220–45, in *Cosmopolitan Urbanism*, ed. Jon Binnie, Julian Holloway, Steve Millington, and Craig Young (London: Routledge, 2006), 223.
- 2 Although “cosmopolitan” is the first category listed, the ads go on for many pages organized also (for the less explicitly cosmopolitan) by caste, community, language, religion, profession, and previous marital status. International educational credentials are noted throughout, but only in the “cosmopolitan” section are alliances invited specifically in terms like “cultured, cosmopolitan, Westernized” or “smart, Westernized, cosmopolitan working for MNC [Multinational Corporation].” <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.
- 3 “C is for Choice, Colour & Cosmopolitan: Introducing the Sony VAIO C-Series,” *Business Wire*. [www.allbusiness.com](http://www.allbusiness.com).
- 4 Mahesh Krishnaswamy, “How to Be Cosmopolitan,” blog post available at <http://mahesh.sulekha.com>.
- 5 Immanuel Kant, “Idea for Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent,” in *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983). It is worth noting that Kant spoke of states as well as individuals being citizens of a universal state of humankind.
- 6 It is worth noting, though, that political philosophy has not always discussed cosmopolitanism very much. Its core concerns have usually been the internal organization and sometimes the external relations of states and in the modern era, especially national states. Cosmopolitanism has lately come back on the agenda because of renewed attention to globalization.
- 7 For important and forceful recent statements of cosmopolitanism as universalism, see Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

p. 200 8 Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 5.

- 9 Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?*; Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 10 In this as in other ways, it echoes rather than transcends nationalism; see Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), on this presumption of directness rather than mediation. Of course there are exceptions to this general tendency in cosmopolitan thought, efforts to understand cosmopolitanism from various scales of relationships across lines of difference rather than categorical similarity on a global scale. For a noteworthy example, see Sheldon I. Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 591–625. Much more abstractly, David Held has seen recognition of diversity as a hallmark of what he calls "cosmopolitan democracy." But he has also seen the issue more as finding appropriate representative mechanisms on a variety of scales than of shifting the idea of cosmopolitanism away from global categorical similarity to the multifarious and heterogeneous making of connections, which is necessarily at least partly local. See especially David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 11 See Samuel Schleffer's critical discussion in *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 12 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Arendt's account of the creative capacity at the heart of being human is inspired largely by ancient Greek thought. Christians and Jews may also draw similar ideas from the biblical book of Genesis, where creative potential is part of what humans derive from being created in the image of God.