



## Cosmopolitanism Versus Non-Cosmopolitanism: Critiques, Defenses, Reconceptualizations, edited by Gillian Brock

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## BOOK REVIEW

Brock, Gillian, ed., *Cosmopolitanism Versus Non-Cosmopolitanism: Critiques, Defenses, Reconceptualizations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. x + 331, £61 (hardback).

This collection brings together prominent proponents of cosmopolitanism and their critics, striking a laudable balance between emerging and established scholars. Gillian Brock's editorial efforts are to be commended for the fact that the volume's chapters are previously unpublished and are specifically tailored to this volume, with several chapters explicitly engaging with and responding to other chapters. As a result, the book shows a coherence that is rare in edited collections.

Brock does not include a chapter on her own work, but opens with an insightful introduction to the cosmopolitanism debate and the positions represented in the volume. The main points of debate concern (1) cosmopolitanism's core claims and intellectual pedigree, (2) the responsibility of the 'global rich' for the plight of the 'global poor', and (3) the compatibility of cosmopolitanism's egalitarian core demands with partiality towards one's compatriots and others. I will focus on the first two debates here, both of which cut across several chapters of the book.

Michael Blake opens the discussion with a challenge: according to him, we are all cosmopolitans now, so we may as well discard the term. Philosophical distinctions should mark lines of controversy, along which debate is divided with regard to some relevant philosophical proposition. Cosmopolitanism, in Blake's view, was a useful concept while most people did not agree that every person has equal moral status, but that is no longer so. Blake points to Thomas Pogge, who in *World Poverty and Human Rights* [2002] identified three cosmopolitan core claims: (i) the ultimate units of concern are human beings or persons (*individualism*), (ii) this status applies to every human being equally (*universality*), and (iii) it has global force: 'Persons are ultimate units of concern for everyone' (*generality*) [39]. According to Blake, this leaves unclear how cosmopolitanism differs from other views.

Much of the debate in this volume suggests that it is the interpretation of the third claim—what it means to share a concern for *everybody* else's equal status—that divides cosmopolitans from non-cosmopolitans. Most of us indeed agree with (iii) as a (comparatively weak) moral claim: everyone ought to treat everyone else with respect, adhere to a principle of non-interference where appropriate, not harm them, etc. But once we interpret (iii) as the much stronger political demand that everyone contribute to generating conditions of social and political equality through fostering just institutions, fault lines appear.

Lea Ypi's position, most clearly opposite to Blake's, is that cosmopolitanism, rather than being a (moral) principle of charity, is an enforceable principle of justice, incompatible with compatriot favouritism, the ultimate goal of which must be a global political authority. Ypi's global egalitarianism could be understood as a maximally strong interpretation of (iii), but it certainly goes well beyond what Pogge and the other authors in this volume advocate.

Laura Valentini rejects this principle of global equality, as not rightfully enforceable and therefore not a genuine principle of justice. She shares with Ypi an understanding of cosmopolitanism as a strong commitment to extending domestic egalitarian principles of justice to the world at large. However, global equality ‘cannot be imposed on dissenting parties without thereby violating equal respect’ [93] which in turn is the basis of egalitarianism. Because we can reasonably disagree on substantive demands of justice, beyond fundamental rights, we need to secure persons’ equal status through creating fair decision-making mechanisms. Her alternative principles of global justice include an outcome component (sufficientarianism) and a procedural component (egalitarian forms of political organization).

Pogge concludes the collection, characterizing cosmopolitanism ‘as a family of positions’ [301], which agree that the moral equality of human beings entails constraints on global political organization analogous to constraints on national political organisation. It grounds a ‘defeasible presumption in favour of equal treatment’ which ‘can be quite powerful in the absence of defeating reasons’ [300]. Finding middle ground between radical cosmopolitans such as Ypi, and non-cosmopolitans, he suggests that his view is compatible with partiality towards one’s compatriots and the near and dear.

In sum, Blake’s challenge seems partly justified: many theorists could identify with a cosmopolitan agenda based on Pogge’s shared cosmopolitan principles, depending on how strongly they interpret the third principle (generality). Pogge somewhat misses his opportunity to clarify this in his chapter. He points to the international realm, where it is not only common but is accepted practice to put one’s country’s interests first to the detriment of others (for instance, when it comes to securing key posts in international organisations), and he shows that cosmopolitanism forbids this sort of failure of impartiality. But, surely, on most accounts cosmopolitanism requires much more than that. Furthermore, while Pogge’s example shows that we are *not* all cosmopolitans now, he misses the point that Blake has in mind theorists, not politicians. In the penultimate chapter, Richard Miller argues that cosmopolitanism’s core claims are somewhat unclear due to its descent from domestic egalitarianism’s ambiguous foundations, but he does not think that we should discard the term. In fact, according to Miller, the need to make distinctions has become too dominant in the discourse at the cost of more substantive debate. Fortunately, this collection gives ample space to such substantive debate.

This takes me to the second concern: the question of responsibility for global justice—whether we ‘harm’ the global poor with our actions and are thus accountable and, relatedly, where to locate agency for delivering on global justice. It is worth noting that the cosmopolitanism debate might benefit from the conceptual tools and lines of argument developed in recent debates on collective agency, responsibility, and duties. It is unfortunate that cosmopolitan authors rarely engage with that debate, with Elizabeth Ashford’s chapter in this volume being a laudable exception, exemplifying how fertile such engagement could be. (The term ‘collective agency’ in the title of Fabian Schuppert’s chapter appears suggestive of such engagement but actually refers to self-determination of existing political communities.)

Saladin Meckled-Garcia’s argument that severe poverty does not constitute human rights violations is, I think, tied to a too restrictive understanding of harm. Meckled-Garcia points to the so-called ‘agency objection’—the view that, due to an agency deficit at the global level, duties to assist the poor are partially unallocated. He says that he is ‘not aware of any author who has supplied this account of agency’ [112]. But this has

actually been attempted, for instance by Wringer [2010], an article that triggered a lively debate about collective agency in the global realm.

According to Meckled-Garcia, a 'minimal' cosmopolitanism can defeat the agency objection through 'characterizing poverty in terms of violations of minimal human rights' by accountable agents. But he is unconvinced by such a view because 'a human rights breach requires a recognizable *action* (or omission) ... that constitutes an identifiable wrong towards a person' [112]. Further, '[t]o be liable for a wrong of this kind one must either be the agent ... performing the wrongful action, or one must collaborate with the wrongful action of another agent' [ibid.]. Neither applies to severe poverty, which therefore is not a human rights violation, and ordinary people who merely engage 'with a network of causes that has negative consequences' [ibid.] cannot be held liable for it, argues Meckled-Garcia.

However, this argument begs the question of whether individual and often unintentional contributions to cumulative harms are wrongful (as in the case of the harmless torturer, where each individual action in itself is not harmful, but the conjunction of the actions is so; or, in the case of greenhouse gas emissions, where individually inconsequential everyday activities contribute to a negative cumulative effect). The moral implications of such collective harm cases are currently the subject of much debate (see, for instance, Lichtenberg [2010]), and it has been suggested that individuals may share have some kind of responsibility for them, even if their contributions differ from that of genuine complicity.

This last idea is picked up by Elizabeth Ashford, who offers a well-argued counterpoint to Meckled-Garcia by distinguishing systemic from standard human rights violations: '[A]cknowledging systematic human rights violations involves moving away from the assumption that identifying responsibility for human rights violations has to involve singling out specific agents as having primary responsibility for specific severe harms to specific victims' [133]. They differ from standard human rights violations, in that the latter are discrete and trigger clearly defined perfect duties. Systemic violations, in contrast, are severe, foreseeable, and predictable 'patterned unjustifiable harms', which cannot be seen by looking at discrete actions and omissions of individual agents [140]. The corresponding duties are undefined, imperfect, and not fully dischargeable. Such harms are feasibly avoidable by reforming those institutions. Only once such reforms take place do individual duties become institutionalized (defined and perfect) and dischargeable. Until then, there exists a shared general duty to bring about institutionalization of individual duties. At the individual level, this duty is imperfect. According to Ashford, these general (shared) duties of justice are difficult to comply with—the onus is on the agent to decide what steps to take.

However, in my view a serious problem remains: how is that shared responsibility or shared duty to be spelled out, and what constitutes a failure to comply with it? In other words, who are the agents of global justice? Who is to take action on abolishing severe poverty and on promoting greater global equality? While Meckled-Garcia speaks of 'ordinary' citizens and their responsibilities, Pogge refers mostly to political decision-makers. The former argues that a plausible account of global justice must be set within the limits of existing agency in the global realm. While it is true that we cannot simply stipulate obligations without agents holding such obligations, at this point some discussion of the literature on emerging agents, polycentric agency, and (collective) obligations that we might have to *form* novel agents would have been most illuminating. Against the background of the current agency gap, focusing only on existing agents

both ignores the potential of emerging collective agency and fails to take sufficiently seriously the wrongness of collective omissions.

If it is true that all of us share responsibility to reform institutions, as Ashford's chapter suggests, are we guilty of collective omission if we fail to bring about such reform? It seems to me that, so long as we do not focus on the problem of agency in the global realm, we will not be able to give a satisfying answer to the question of what the demands of global justice are. Naturally, a collection like this one leaves many questions unanswered, but it moves the debate forward in diverse and original ways.

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