

THE SPACE OF COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNICATION

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In his book *The Parasite*, published in 1980, French philosopher Michel Serres makes use of the basic categories of information theory to help explain the human practices of inclusion and exclusion. In this paper, I would like to apply Serres's analysis to contemporary debates concerning moral cosmopolitanism. Broadly speaking, moral cosmopolitanism is the view that we have moral obligations to human beings not insofar as they are members of particular national, ethnic, cultural, religious, or linguistic communities, but merely insofar as they are human beings. Proponents of moral cosmopolitanism often articulate their position in terms of the metaphor of concentric circles, developed by the second century Stoic philosopher Hierocles. According to Hierocles, "each one of us is as it were entirely encompassed by many circles, some smaller, others larger, the latter enclosing the former on the basis of their different and unequal dispositions relative to each other" (Hierocles c. 100: 349). The interior circles contain people, including ourselves, with whom we have strong affective bonds, while those in the outer circles are more distant from us, both spatially and affectively. The task of the moral cosmopolitan, in terms of the metaphor, is "to draw the circles together somehow towards the center, and to keep zealously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed ones" (Hierocles c. 100: 349). Critics of moral cosmopolitanism often make use of the same metaphor: they argue that our morally significant relations will always be with those in the inner circles, and that our relations with those in the outer circles can only ever be lifeless and abstract. Cosmopolitanism, from this point of view, is impracticable and utopian. In this paper, I would like to argue that the metaphor of concentric circles presupposes a particular understanding of communication that is no longer adequate, and that a different, topological metaphor, suggested by Serres, is more helpful for thinking through what is at stake in debates about moral cosmopolitanism.

Noise and Hierocles' Metaphor of Concentric Circles

Most basically, information theory is concerned with the process by which messages, which are encoded by their senders and transmitted

across channels of communication, are received and decoded at their points of destination. The insight from information theory that is most important to Michel Serres's philosophy of communication is that in any act of communication, the message that the sender intends to convey will be distorted to at least some degree by the properties of the channel of communication across which it is sent. A message that is broadcast by radio, for example, might be distorted by static to such an extent that the receiver misunderstands it, or even fails to receive it at all. In French, this noise in the system is called the parasite. Like a parasite in both the biological and the ancient Greek senses of the term, noise takes without giving. It insinuates itself into a system and disrupts its proper functioning. From the point of view of the system, then, noise manifests itself as something that must be excluded. It is self-evidently bad, while the system for whose benefit it is excluded is self-evidently good and worthy of being preserved as it is (Serres 1980: 66-67).

Serres makes use of this conception of noise as parasite to explain the formation and consolidation of group identities. A group of people constitutes itself as a we, according to Serres, by making what outsiders regard as noise. A clique, for example, establishes and reinforces its identity through in-jokes and references to shared experiences. On a larger scale, members of national and cultural communities communicate with each other by means of shared cultural and historical reference points—television programs, popular music, fashion, sporting events, etc.—which other national or cultural groups perceive as noise. But to consolidate a we, it is not enough merely to make what others perceive as noise. It is also necessary to actively not understand the noise that others make. Insofar as others make sense to us, they are less other and we are less a determinate we. It is a common opinion, for example, that others—whoever those others might be—can only understand the language of force. They cannot be reasoned with; their aspirations, demands, and accusations amount to so much noise. To the extent that the points of view of one's perceived national, ethnic, or racial enemies make sense, one's sense of belonging to one's own group feels less secure. Likewise, many men experience women's articulations of their own experiences as noise: "everybody" knows that women are impossible to understand. For a man to make the effort no longer to perceive women's articulations of their experience as noise would be to put in question his own identity as a man. Groups thus consolidate their identities by actively excluding the noise, which manifests itself first and foremost as a force of disruption.

I believe that Hierocles' metaphor of the concentric circles can be profitably understood with reference to Serres's philosophy of communication. Specifically, the farther removed the circle is from the center, the more noise disrupts communication between the inhabitants of that

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circle and oneself. The persons closest to oneself are regarded as especially morally relevant because one identifies especially closely with them. Importantly, the center of the concentric circles that encompass each person is that person's own mind. In the relation that one has with oneself, there is zero noise: one understands oneself with perfect transparency precisely because there is no channel of communication necessary to mediate between sender and receiver. Because of this, one identifies with oneself, and is therefore inclined to grant oneself a pre-eminent degree of moral consideration. The innermost circle, according to Hierocles' metaphor, encloses the body, which is held responsible for much of human error by a philosophical tradition that goes back at least as far as Plato. The senses can be understood as the channels of communication that mediate between the forms of things and the mind that conceives them. One's idea of a desk, for example, is mediated by the particular desks that one sees and touches. These particular desks suggest the idea of a desk in general, but they also stand in the way of one's conceiving that idea with perfect lucidity. One never sees the desk in general, only this or that desk with its own particular characteristics. But despite the fact that the body is a source of noise, one identifies closely with it: experiences of pain and pleasure, of color, sound, touch, etc., are manifestly one's own. The next circle, which encloses close family members, introduces more noise. Members of a family share a common life, with common tasks and a common history, and so they understand each other well. Nonetheless, one's relation with a sister or a father is necessarily noisier than one's relation with oneself: one communicates with them by means of signs that can be more easily misinterpreted than the signs that are addressed to one by one's own body. Relations with the outermost circle involve the most noise, since we do not share a common life, including common tasks and a common history, with the whole of the human race. One is separated from the vast majority of human beings by innumerable differences—linguistic, cultural, historical, religious, political, etc. One cannot identify with these people; they do not make sense.

But it is not merely the case that the people in the outer circle do not make sense; as Serres has suggested, one has a strong incentive not even to want to understand them. To understand people in the outer circles is to risk introducing noise into the nearer relations. The student who goes off to college, for example, or who participates in a study abroad program, learns to make sense of what would previously have been noise. But the new dispositions and perspectives that she has assimilated introduce noise into her relationships with her family and closest friends, who do not understand her as transparently as they used to. These new dispositions and perspectives may even introduce noise into her relation to herself, causing her to question her most basic values and

projects, the value of which she would otherwise have taken for granted. From the point of view of someone who values the stability of the well-established relationships and self-understandings that give life meaning and orientation—and to some extent at least, this includes nearly everyone—the noise will manifest itself as something that must be excluded.

Moral Cosmopolitanism and the Folded Handkerchief

The moral cosmopolitan argues that we ought to overcome this natural way of looking at things and learn to let the noise in. According to Hierocles, “it is incumbent on us to respect people from the third circle as if they were those from the second, and again to respect our other relatives as if they were those from the third circle. For although the greater distance in blood will remove some affection, we must still try hard to assimilate them” (Hierocles c. 100: 349). To assimilate those from the outer circles is to stop excluding their noise, to at least make the effort to understand it, and thus to put one’s identification with the closer circles into question. It is to deny the moral relevance, or at least the moral pre-eminence, of the distinction between us and them, and to regard oneself, like the Cynic philosopher Diogenes, as *kosmopolitēs*, a citizen of the world (Diogenes Laertius c. 225: 65).

It is this last move that the moral anti-cosmopolitan most explicitly rejects. The anti-cosmopolitan believes that our moral consciousness is shaped—literally in-formed—by information. Our moral understanding is oriented and sustained by particular communities with particular sets of shared, well-understood norms. According to Michael W. McConnell, “moral education of necessity begins with those close enough to engage in ... loving relationships: with parents and family, expanding to neighbors, churches, synagogues, and local schools—communities that are familiar and that are able to provide a unifying focus to the moral life” (Nussbaum 2002: 80). The sphere of moral concern then expands from this affective center: we learn to acknowledge the moral relevance of those outside our inner circles by recognizing their ways of life as somehow analogous to our own. Our moral concern for others thus presupposes our more basic concern with our own communities. Moral cosmopolitanism, from this point of view, is both utopian and dangerous. It is utopian because it simply asks too much of us: “Diogenes may have regarded himself as a citizen of the world, but global citizenship demands of its patriots levels of abstraction and disembodiment most women and men will be unable or unwilling to muster....” (Nussbaum 2002: 34). And it is dangerous because it undermines the conditions that are necessary for the development and sustenance of moral experience.

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I would like to argue that this anti-cosmopolitan argument is based on an understanding of communication that is becoming increasingly inadequate. The metaphor of concentric circles suggests that the relationship between the inner and outer circles is fixed: the outer circles are necessarily more distant from the center than the inner circles. In a strictly spatial sense, I am necessarily nearer to my own community than to distant communities. And in large part because of this spatial distance, I am also nearer to my own community in terms of affection and understanding. The channel of communication that connects me to the outer circles is, metaphorically speaking, very long and thus very likely to be filled with noise. Because I can have only the vaguest understanding of, and thus affection for, those people who occupy the outer circles, I cannot realistically be expected to accord them the same moral concern that I quite naturally grant to those from my own community. It is this metaphor of concentric circles, with its fixed distances, that is no longer adequate to describe the relations of communication that obtain in the contemporary world. In his *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, Michel Serres offers what I believe is a more adequate metaphor:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. (Serres and Latour 1990: 60)

In the topological space of communication, we can no longer take for granted the strong correlation between spatial distance and noise. On the folded handkerchief, we find noise right at the center of the circle and information at the periphery. With the advent of the Internet, for example, I am able to access *Le Monde* as easily as I can access my hometown newspaper. *Le Monde*, which appears every day on the screen of my home computer in St. Louis, Missouri, is written in French. Between the senders of *Le Monde*'s various messages and me, there is inevitably some noise: I read French well, but I nonetheless fail to grasp the sense of certain idioms and cultural references. Despite the noise, though, I develop a concern for issues, such as the controversy over the banning of the veil, that directly affect the lives of people whom I will probably never meet and with whom I do not share a common religion, culture, or history. I am concerned in a genuinely moral way about these people. Indeed I often find that I am more concerned with these issues than I am with issues in St. Louis. But I also find that my moral concern with

people in my own inner circles is shaped by my concerns with issues in the outer circles. I come to understand my own community and the meaning of its commitment to a specific vision of liberal democracy when I view it in light of the distinctly French vision. My exposure to the noise thus renders my own inner circle more richly meaningful.

Banal Cosmopolitanism as the Noisy World Community

This kind of cosmopolitanization of the local gives rise to what sociologists call banal cosmopolitanism. Looked at in this way, cosmopolitanism is neither a utopian fantasy nor a great threat to the moral fabric of individual communities. It is rather a feature of our everyday lives so pervasive that we tend for the most part to take it for granted. In nearly every major city in the world, for example, one has access to an enormous variety of international cuisines. One has unprecedented access to cultural products—music, literature, film, etc.—from all over the world. We cheer for our local sports teams, whose players come from all over the world. We watch television advertisements that depict the suffering of people all over the world, and we give our money to such organizations as Oxfam, Amnesty International, and Doctors Without Borders, who work to better the lives of these people, without regard to the distinction between us and them. From this more descriptive, sociological point of view, then, the normative question about whether or to what degree we ought to become cosmopolitan appears misguided. We already are cosmopolitan. The world already is like the folded handkerchief described by Serres, where the outer circles appear in direct proximity to the inner circles.

The metaphor of the folded handkerchief should not be taken to suggest that the world as a whole now constitutes a single community in which noise has been eliminated to the greatest possible degree. If anything, the opposite is true: banal cosmopolitanism makes the world noisier than ever. But this is not a bad thing. Noise, I want to argue, is not best understood as a threat to communication, but rather as its very condition. If there were no noise whatever between the sender of a message and its receiver, then communication would be reduced to the exchange of fixed tokens of meaning. The sender would have in mind a perfectly determinate, transparent signification, which the receiver would already possess in an equally determinate, transparent way. In such a noise-free system of communication, it could never happen that another's words—or for that matter, another's gestures, pronunciations, modes of dress, or any other of her signs—would ever lead one to understand the world differently. A noise-free system would be one of perfect stasis, in which significations would be fixed, and in which, therefore, there would be nothing to say. We communicate because

there is something to be said, because there is a dimension of meaning that exceeds fixed significations. We communicate, in short, because there is noise.

I would like to conclude by returning to the anti-cosmopolitan argument that suggests that we do not maintain real connections to humanity as such, but only to particular kinds of people, some of whom are "our" kind and others of whom are not. I hope to have shown that this is simply false. It is true, of course, that we interact with others in terms of the kinds of persons they are—as parents, bank tellers, bosses, Americans, Christians, etc. And of course some of these kinds are more familiar to us than others. But humanity is not best conceived as an abstraction from these kinds, as the highest genus of which they are all species. Humanity, I would like to argue, is rather present to us as that undetermined and undeterminable something = x that exceeds the significations in terms of which we recognize and interact with people. Humanity, as opposed to this or that kind of humanity, is noise. In conditions of banal cosmopolitanism, represented by the metaphor of the folded handkerchief, we maintain relations with humanity in this sense that are more pervasive than ever before. It is no longer feasible, if indeed it ever was, to continue to struggle against the noise. Morally speaking, this is a good thing.

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