

Reviews section

Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2006, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*

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Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers. Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2006. New York: W. W. Norton, 196 pp.

Appiah begins by noting that our human world is becoming smaller because people have more access to each other than ever before in history through migration, international trade, tourism, exposure to mass media and particularly the internet. He thinks that we now have the unique opportunity to affect the lives of others everywhere and to learn from them. Appiah asks: how are we to deal with these new circumstances? What ideas and institutions can help us to live together in our new global tribe? Appiah proposes cosmopolitanism.

Appiah's cosmopolitanism combines two inter-related strands. One is the idea that we have obligations to those who are beyond the people who are close to us like our kin or compatriots. A cosmopolitan is a citizen of the world and it suggests belonging to the human community, believing the oneness of humanity, and universal concern. The second is taking interest in the lives, practices and beliefs of others. It is openness and receptiveness to art and literature of other places. It is an obligation to

understand those with whom we share this planet. Appiah believes that there is much to learn from our differences. According to Appiah, cosmopolitanism begins with conversation across boundaries.

Appiah defends what he calls a partial cosmopolitanism. Appiah is critical of those he thinks are immoderate cosmopolitans. These are thinkers who deny the importance of nation-states, national boundaries, and borders and they regard their friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality. He is sympathetic to the view that local loyalties and allegiances are important because they determine who we are. So he encourages us to embrace both local and universal loyalties and allegiances and denies that they necessarily come into conflict with each other.

These are some of the main ideas in Appiah's book. They can be all found in the *Introduction* which is a good summary of the book. The ten chapters that follow try to shed light and to expand on them. In the first chapter called *The Shattered Mirror*, Appiah argues that looking at the world clearly shows that there are a variety of ways of life and thought. He points out that not all disagreements can be resolved and urges us to accept differences, embrace pluralism, and adopt a live-and-let-live attitude.

In the second chapter called *The Escape from Positivism*, Appiah argues that relativism, positivism, and in particular the fact and value distinction, often get in the way of the cosmopolitan project and undermine conversation across boundaries, getting to know others who are different, and learning from them. Simply put, if when we disagree we are both right, then there is nothing to talk about. Appiah also emphasizes the way our values are shaped by conversations with others, in which we try to shape each others' views and feelings.

The third chapter *Facts on the Ground* is an attack on the positivist notion of fact. Appiah argues that facts are not as solid as we may suppose. He tries to show that facts are in no more solid ground than values. He uses the example of trying to persuade a traditional Asante (his kinfolk) that witchcraft can not harm people, to show that facts largely depend on what you already believe and what ideas you already have.

In chapter four *Moral Disagreement*, Appiah looks at the various ways we can come in conflict over values. His main insight is that value terms are essentially contestable and that they will always be argued about both across cultures and within them. Even when we share the same moral vocabulary, we can disagree if we interpret the same values differently and weigh them differently.

In the fifth chapter called *The Primacy of Practice*, Appiah argues that even though moral disagreements can happen and are real, cross-cultural conversations about values do not have to end in disagreement because it is often possible to agree about what to do even when we do not agree on the reasons behind it. For example, we can live in peace and harmony without agreeing on the underlying values. Appiah discourages us from insisting on reaching agreements on values by means of reasoned arguments and persuasion. These very often fail to move people. Moreover, if we make this insistence, then we will lose what is worth while about conversations across boundaries. When Appiah proposes conversations between people, what he has in mind by conversation is really an engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. In this sense, conversations do not have to lead to agreements about values.

In the sixth chapter called *Imaginary Strangers*, Appiah notes that human beings everywhere have so much in common. These include everyday activities, such as buying things, eating, reading the paper, laughing, going to movies, parties and funerals. They also include universal values such as kindness and generosity. He argues that these can be entry points to cross cultural conversations. Once we see that we have some shared ideas, we can open up more to other ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

In the seventh chapter called *Cosmopolitan Contamination*, arguing against those who criticize globalization for producing homogeneity and getting rid of cultural differences, Appiah claims that globalization is also a threat to homogeneity because it creates new forms of difference. He thinks that instead of the talk of preserving diversity and trapping people in conditions they want to escape from, we have got to let people choose for themselves. Appiah believes that people everywhere make

their own use of global commodities. They are not blank tablets on which global capitalism can write whatever it wants, they are not fools but they can resist.

In chapter eight entitled *Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?*, Appiah begins by pointing out that some of the museums of the world, particularly in the West, have large collections of objects and artefacts which were looted from poor and developing countries. He then asks: who owns these cultural artefacts and properties? Our first answer may be that since they make up the cultural heritage of a people, they belong to the people and culture from whom they were taken. Appiah disputes this and argues that if some cultural artefacts are of potential value to all human beings, they should belong to all of humanity. He thinks that when they make contribution to world culture, they should be protected by being made available to those who would benefit from experiencing them and put into trusteeship of humanity. Appiah argues that rather than focusing on returning stolen art and putting a lot of money and effort into it, it may serve the interest of those whose artefacts were stolen better to be exposed to a decent collection of art from around the world, like people everywhere else.

In the ninth chapter called *The Counter-Cosmopolitanism*, Appiah begins by drawing a picture of the kind of quests for universal community which we should be wary of and reject because they can lead to blood-baths. He is thinking of global religious fundamentalism which insists on one version of universal truth. Islamic and Christian fundamentalists who seek a community of those who share their faith and reject all national and local allegiances have no tolerance for religious difference. Appiah argues that their universalism is contrary to cosmopolitanism which embraces pluralism and promotes the view that our knowledge is imperfect and provisional and that we might learn something from those we disagree with. The other enemies of cosmopolitanism are those who reject universality. They claim that not everyone matters. They tell us why. Such and such people are destroying our nation; they are inferior; they have earned our contempt and deserve it.

One aspect of cosmopolitanism is obligations to strangers. In the tenth and last chapter called *Kindness to Strangers*, Appiah looks at the

question of what do we owe strangers? His answer is mainly negative. He begins by observing that cosmopolitanism can not and does not demand from us to have more sympathy and concern for strangers than those close to us. It can not make impossible psychological demands. He then examines the view of thinkers like Peter Unger and Peter Singer which suggests that we should give most of our money and property to groups like OXFAM and UNICEF to help the very poor. Appiah believes that these thinkers are mistaken to burden us with incredible obligations which would dramatically reduce the quality of our lives. According to Appiah, whatever our obligations are to strangers, they must not be too burdensome because these are not the only obligations that matter.

Of course, Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* is more than just this catalogue of arguments and views. It is a clear and well-written book which is enjoyable to read. Appiah skillfully blends his philosophical ideas with anecdotes about his own life and background. Kwame Anthony Appiah is a Ghanaian-American philosopher who was raised in Ghana and educated in England. He belongs to the Ashanti tribe and Akan people. In reading this book, we travel to many places and we come to know him a little and also his father, mother, and various other kinsfolk and tribe members. Appiah introduces us to many traditions, practices and ideas of his African ancestry to clarify his ideas on human interactions, conversations, and globalization.

Some of Appiah's chapters are better researched and more insightful than others. I think that, for example, Appiah's chapter on globalization could have been stronger. He is too dismissive of those who are critical of globalization and focuses only on one aspect of their criticisms, namely their worry that globalization wipes out local cultures. So he does not address the worry that the global financial institutions and multinational corporations want to expand the world markets for their own interests and that they undercut and weaken local governments, laws, and decision-making. Western industrial nations promote free trade, but this in fact benefits them and makes them richer and more powerful. The agriculture and export subsidies in the West are one of the main causes of agricultural decline in many developing countries. So globalization per-

petuates and worsens the unequal balance of power between rich industrial and poor developing countries, rather than addressing it in any way. Appiah casts the critics of globalization as people who are afraid of change, but some of the critics are legitimately concerned with global justice and local sovereignty.

Appiah's chapter on cosmopolitan justice is also weak. One of the main components of Appiah's cosmopolitanism is ethical commitment to strangers. But his view of what this amounts to is very thin. Instead of speculating about what commitments do we incur if we want to make the world a substantially better place, Appiah comes up with a list of constraints. He is very critical of the idea of world government as a vehicle for upholding and guaranteeing people's basic rights. For Appiah the primary mechanism for ensuring basic rights is the nation-state. Appiah then warns us about those who want to burden us with too much and urge us to overlook our obligations to those close to us and to our own self and projects.

It is difficult to see how the concerns which underpin cosmopolitan ethics or justice can be addressed solely in the context of national politics. Those who are passionate about cosmopolitan justice are concerned about extreme poverty, tyranny, oppression, and environmental degradation. Seriously addressing these seems to also require working with international organizations which go beyond national borders and forming connections and associations with others elsewhere who have similar goals.

Moreover, despite Appiah's legitimate worries about establishing a world government, it is clear that world governing bodies and institutions, such as United Nations and World Bank, already exist, deal with cosmopolitan justice issues, and have much power. At the least, making the world more just would demand that these institutions become more democratic and fair and do a better job of protecting people's rights.

In the final analysis it is unclear what obligations does Appiah think each person has to strangers, except perhaps to converse with them and respect their differences. For Appiah the current global circumstances somewhat resembles the original position of Rawls, in which a variety of people who live together are coming together to discuss and decide what

sorts of rules and institutions would be best for coexistence and living well. But Appiah never ventures to speculate about what rules and institutions would best serve everyone's interests and protect their rights and freedoms.

