Rooted Cosmopolitanism

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[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Waterhouse-Diogenes.jpg)Diogenes the Cynic, a citizen of the world, in a painting by John William Waterhouse

Tuesday saw the first of a series of reading groups that I'm organizing at CRASSH on the subject of ethical conversations across borders. There will be four sessions this term, each dealing with a different theme, taking in readings from anthropology, sociology, philosophy and history.

The first session, on *rooted cosmopolitanisms*, was based on texts by philosopher Martha Nussbaum and sociologist Bryan Turner.

Cosmopolitanism is perhaps most frequently used to describe the flows of people and goods between geographically remote regions. Following this usage, a 'cosmopolitan' is someone who moves with facility between different regions or cultures. However, the term cosmopolitan is also used with an ethical force. In this sense, it is the idea that ethical considerations ought not be limited by geographical boundaries. An ethical cosmopolitan claims that all persons are equally significant moral beings, no matter where they are located or where they have come from. On this view, any ethical attachment for members of one's own ethnic group or nation or religion is exercised at the expense of others.

This is a position that Nussbaum has defended before. However, in the paper we discussed in the reading group, 'Toward a globally sensitive patriotism' (paywall), she argues that although the classical conception of cosmopolitanism, which appeals to reason alone, is right and desirable, it is in incapable of motivating people and cannot therefore be the basis of an effective politics. What local, particularistic accounts can provide, which cosmopolitanism, she says, cannot, is a rich background of historical events, experiences of landscapes and particular personalities that can play effectively on the emotions.

Nussbaum distinguishes between two forms of love of country. One form, which she calls patriotism, is focused on leading the subject to think beyond the self to the good of something greater. Though it entails particularistic attachments that can come at the cost of global obligations, Nussbaum believes that patriotism is compatible with cosmopolitanism and that through its repertoire of local, historically rich narratives it is capable of evoking altruistic feelings that can be extended beyond the nation. She gives several examples of patriotic rhetoric that she believes achieves this goal of harnessing the horse of visceral attachment to the particular to the carriage of tolerance and compassion. These include speeches by Martin Luther King and Gandhi, among others.

The other form of love of country Nussbaum calls nationalism, this is based on exclusion of others, and works with shame and disgust. Nationalism in this sense is incompatible with cosmopolitanism.

Turner's paper, 'Cosmopolitan Virtue' (paywall) addresses the problem of human rights. Human rights are problematic for a number of reasons, including that their advocates can provide no grounds on which the obligations that must correspond to rights (i.e. the obligation not to encroach on rights, the obligation to redress the denial of rights, and so on) might be based. Turner aims to rescue rights by proposing a cosmopolitan virtue which would form the basis of such obligations.

Like Nussbaum, Turner thinks that a reason-only approach would prove ineffective, writing, 'The idea of global citizenship is probably too abstract and vague to carry conviction and commitment' (p. 49). The solution he proposes harks back to an idea of citizenship that predates the modern nation-state: '…citizenship was originally a product of Renaissance humanism, in which the ascending order of the state and the horizontal ordering of citizenship contrasted with the descending theme of the Church and its hierarchical order of institutionalized grace… This tradition of citizenship became linked to the norms of civility, civilization and civil society.' Becoming a citizen in this sense was a matter of cultivating virtues, a matter of education or formation. The virtues were universal ones, but they were learnt in a particular form and in relation to specific political institutions and traditions. This is the kind of cosmopolitan virtue that Turner thinks can provide the obligation that is missing from human rights theory, a virtue that is based in specific attachments and can therefore command people's emotions, but which is aimed at universal goods and avoids exclusion. The virtues he has in mind emerge as conditions of political debate and trade, but extend from politeness to care for the other.

Turner also makes a number of other interesting points, in particular in relation to the universality of the rejection of suffering (a questionable idea, I think), and about the relation between cosmopolitanism and irony, but I won't go into those here.

In terms of the question of ethical conversations across borders, I think the most interesting aspects of these papers are:

1. The combination of empirical and rationalist approaches. Both Nussbaum and Turner are committed to a universalist ethics that they see as being based on reason, but argue that for practical reasons this must be combined with contingent ethical forms that are necessarily local and historical. One can imagine other thinkers arriving in the same place from the opposite direction: a commitment to an empirical approach to ethics based on actual custom and precedent, a commitment that needs to be laid aside in international contexts in favour of a first-principles approach because there is an insufficient body of shared custom among parties who transact at that level.

2. Their arguments raise the question of the spatial relationship of global ethics and local ethics. Is the cosmopolitan to conceive of global ethics (i) as being beyond space, something that applies at all times and in all places where moral persons happen to be, (ii) as being related to the planet earth as a place, just as local ethics are related to local places, or (iii) in relation to cosmopolitan spaces such as international cities, pilgrimage sites, universities and so on, where citizens of a number of different local polities meet and rub along together? Neither author really answers this question, though Turner does talk about the importance of cosmopolitan cities in the development of cosmopolitan virtue, especially in relation to the ironic detachment from one's own tradition that he sees as essential to cosmopolitanism. Perhaps the aim of Nussbaum's patriotism is to lead from (i) to (ii)? Perhaps that would depend on the emergence of prominent participatory political institutions at the global level. Will the increasing importance of international cities lead from (i) to (iii), or from (iii) to (ii)? This issue — the location of the global — is relevant to any scheme that attempts to connect local and universal ethical considerations.

References

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