# When Diversity and Liberty Conflict: Cosmopolitanism

“The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest.”  (J.S. Mill, “On Liberty”)

In essay called “The Case for Contamination,” the contemporary philosopher **Kwame Appiah** offers an argument for what is known as a **cosmopolitan** political philosophy. In very rough terms, cosmopolitans hold that individual persons—with all of their diverse interests and lives—are fundamentally “citizens of the world,” as opposed to citizens of nations, members of certain ethnic/religious groups, or what have you. Appiah is concerned with showing how cosmopolitanism relates to some competing political philosophies, especially as it comes to dealing with cultural diversity. As a cosmopolitan, Appiah values such diversity, insofar as it gives people additional options for how to live their lives. However, he’s very suspicious of people and governments that try to “protect” existing cultures from **globalization** by restricting the ability of individual citizens to interact with other cultures (this might be conservatives arguing for immigration restrictions, or progressives “protecting” traditional cultures by restricting trade/building/etc.). In this lecture, we’ll be taking a closer look at his argument, and consider its relation to some debates in contemporary political philosophy.

## What’s Good About Tradition? What are some Worries About it?

“The right approach, I think, starts by taking individuals -- not nations, tribes or "peoples" -- as the proper object of moral concern. It doesn't much matter what we call such a creed, but in homage to Diogenes, the fourth-century Greek Cynic and the first philosopher to call himself a "citizen of the world," we could call it cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitans take cultural difference seriously, because they take the choices individual people make seriously. But because cultural difference is not the only thing that concerns them, they suspect that many of globalization's cultural critics are aiming at the wrong targets.” (K. Appiah)

**What is Globalization? How Might It Affect “Traditional Culture”?** *Globalization* is tough to define precisely, but it involves the historical process by which human society has become increasingly “global.” For example; 5,000 years ago, local societies had relatively isolated economic systems, languages, religions, sports, food, fashion, etc. Today, there is a *global* economic system, and people regularly buy products made in other countries. Similarly, most people belong to one of relatively few religious/philosophical traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, humanism), and speak the same languages (Mandarin, English, Spanish, etc.). Increasingly, the same sorts of sports, food, clothes, and media are available to children wherever they happen to grow up (you can always play the British sport of football/soccer, eat the Mexican taco, wear the American baseball cap, play the Japanese Nintendo, and so on). In this process, of course, old languages, traditions, jobs, religions, etc. have disappeared (or at least radically changed). **Preservationists** have argued that globalization needs to be slowed or stopped, in order to protect indigenous cultures from the “**cultural imperialism”** of the U.S., Europe, Japan, etc. Within rich countries, there are similar ideas about protecting “local” cultures from change. Appiah thinks these arguments are largely (though not entirely) misguided.

**What’s the Problem With “Preserving” Traditional Cultures?** Appiah doesn’t see anything with preserving culture by sponsoring museums, cultural festivals, by including units about history/culture/language in the education of children, and so on. However, he DOES oppose efforts to “protect” indigenous cultures from the globalization by limiting the freedoms of the individual people who actually *live* in these cultures. These “protections” might include trade barriers, immigration policies, language laws, restrictions on internet/TV/etc., and actions of a similar sort, all of which effectively constrain the choices of people in various ways. So, for example, Appiah thinks it is undeniable that incorporation into the bigger world has changed the lives of people in Ghana (his native country) in both big and small ways: it introduced cocoa (now a major crop), Christianity (now a major religion), Western popular culture, and so on. This undeniably hurt some people who were better off under the old ways of things of doing things. However, Appiah thinks that, overall, these innovations have improved the lives of ordinary Ghanaians by giving them additional *choices* in how to lead their lives. For this reason, he thinks it would be wrong to try to protect Ghanaians by restricting their access to Western products, media, etc. (And vice versa: it would be wrong for rich nations to try to “stamp out” the unique cultures of immigrants). He also thinks there are cases where cultures can correct one another—for example, he notes that the sort of debt bondage that has been common in many parts of South Asia may well count as “slavery” according to (Western-influenced) international law. Similarly, many other traditions and customs may well provide models that Western cultures could learn from.

**What Sort of Diversity Really Matters? Individual or Cultural?** One way of thinking about what divides “cultural protectionists” from cosmopolitans is to focus on what *sort* of diversity each of them value. Cultural protectionists aim for a world in which there are a large diversity of unique *cultures;* however, each individual person will likely have exposure to only a few of these cultures. By contrast, cosmopolitans imagine a world in which more and more people have access to a rich global culture that allows *each individual* access to a diversity of ideas and lifestyles. A simple example: 50 years ago, there were a larger proportion of independently owned restaurants, and each U.S./European/Japanese city had something like its own “culture” of food. However, for individuals living in each city, there wasn’t actually a huge variety of food. Now, by contrast, most cities in the developed world have lots (and lots) of chain restaurants, and the food options in the U.S./Europe/Japan are much more similar than they once were. However, for individual *consumers,* there is actually a much wider diversity of food available: you can get sushi in the U.S., bratwurst in Tokyo, etc. So, while there was a loss of diversity among cultures, there is actually more diversity available to individuals.

**What’s a Liberal? Why Does it Matter?** Appiah belongs to a long tradition of philosophical **liberals** going back to people like J.S. Mill. According to liberals, we should do our best to let other people decide *for themselves* what counts as a “good life.” A healthy, liberal society is one where people are exposed to lots of *different* sorts of lives and ideas, so that they can figure out what is best for them. Liberals think governments, companies, social groups, religions, etc. should refrain from using force/shame/etc. to restrict people’s behavior unless this behavior is actually harming other people.

## The Opposing views: Fundamentalism and communitarianism

“It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world, and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are.”  (Alasdair MacIntyre)

Cosmopolitans (and liberals more generally) think that a just society is one that accommodates a wide variety of different lifestyles and individual ideas about what is “good.” However, cosmopolitans think that are clear *limits* on this—it isn’t “anything goes.” For example, cosmopolitans are happy to countenance a wide variety of cultural practices and beliefs, but not if these beliefs condone slavery, lead to the mistreatment of women/homosexuals/minority groups, and so on. This is a sort of middle ground between two opposing views, which might be called **fundamentalism** and **communitarianism.** Unlike cosmopolitans, these rival theories hold that society and government SHOULD be actively involved in actively shaping and preserving culture, and in pushing citizens toward a certain conception of the good (something cosmopolitans and liberals do NOT accept). However, they disagree on the *reason* for this:

* Fundamentalists (such as religious fundamentalists, Stalinist communists, etc.) agreewith cosmopolitans about the importance of the *individual* as opposed to the *community,* but they disagree with the idea that there are a wide variety of “good lives” that people might pursue. Instead, they hold that there is a single correct way to live, and that we should what we can to make sure that all people lead their lives this way. (So, for example, anyone who thinks that nonbelievers are sent to hell will be a fundamentalist of this type) It’s important to note that there is nothing in the definition of fundamentalism that requires violence (and the vast majority of fundamentalists are not violent!). However, one common worry about fundamentalism is that it makes it *easy* to justify violent aggression toward different cultures, on the grounds that this is for their own good (“We’re just trying to liberate the working classes! Introduce the true religion!...”).
* Communitarians (like Alasdair MacIntyre, qtd. above) agree with cosmopolitans on the importance of diversity, but they disagree with the cosmopolitan focus on the choices available to individual people. Instead, they focus on the importance of preserving “communal” institutions, such as the community’s “traditional” religion, culture, or way of life. They tend to think that (1) people *need* to have access to certain social of institutions such as religion, art, etc., if they actually want to lead good lives, (2) these things will be destroyed by traditional liberalism or cosmopolitanism, which leads to ever-increasing globalization, and so (3) governments and other institutions should take steps to protect/preserve their valued institutions. For this reason, they don’t see anything wrong with the government providing much more active support. Unlike the fundamentalist, they tend to argue that the government should make sure to support a *variety* of these institutions (e.g., not every school should be a Catholic school; instead, this should depend on what religion is favored by the community). However, they don’t agree with the general cosmopolitan idea that “more choices” means “a better life.” Like fundamentalists, many (though not all) communitarians tend to be religious, and they think it is OK/good for us to try and preserve religious institutions. However, they tend NOT to think that the government/society should support a *single* religion to the exclusion of all others. Communitarian ideas are sometimes associated with ideas related to so-called **identity politics** or to “protecting traditional ways of life.”

It’s important to note that all three categories of thinkers (cosmopolitans, fundamentalists, communitarians) can be politically to the “left” or the “right” (and traditionally, this hasn’t been as important a political difference as some others, though this has changed in recent years). In contemporary politics, the “center left” and “center right” have tended to be more cosmopolitan than their critics from the left or right (who often criticize ideas related to “cultural imperialism”, “neoliberalism”, or “globalism”).

## Some Problems: Education, Identity Politics, Immigration, War

However much they value cultural diversity, cosmopolitans ultimately believe that, when push comes to shove, the obligation to protect and promote individual liberty should “win out” over any obligation to preserve or protect existing ways of life. This distinguishes them from both fundamentalists and communitarians. Once one begins to look, one can find examples of these competing political philosophies in many different areas.

* **How much control should parents, religions, or local communities have over education?** In the U.S., individual states (and even school districts) set certain minimum requirements for K-12 education in order to ensure that children are able to function effectively as adults. However, the content of these standards (and the ways in which they are assessed) has been a matter of fierce debate, with home-school parents, religious schools, and local schoolboards often arguing that they have a moral right to communicate their *own* values to their children, and to shelter children from influences that may present alternatives to these values. While many cosmopolitans would grant the value of a diversity of educational models (not every model works for each child!), they would likely disagree with the idea that groups have any “moral right” to preserve their own way of life, at least if this hinders in any way the ability of children to choose their *own* conception of the good when they reach adulthood. So, a cosmopolitan government might be more prone to *limit* the ability of local groups to shape education in this way.
* **Is the government, or any other group, ever justified in using coercion to “protect” minority cultures?** In some cases (e.g., in the French-speaking areas of Canada), governments have chosen to “protect” a minority culture by legally *mandating* that people living in this are behave in a certain way (e.g., by laws requiring the use of French). Absent these requirements, it is plausible that French would all but disappear within a few generations, as English-speaking Canadians and Americans moved to Montreal, French-speaking Quebecois increasingly used English in their personal and professional lives, etc. To a lesser extent, non-governmental groups can sometimes do the same sort of thing, when they try to preserve their religious, ethnic, or cultural heritage by shaming or otherwise coercing members of the community into behaving in “culturally appropriate” ways. In this case, cosmopolitans are more prone to “let nature take its course,” while communitarians and fundamentalists might want to protect “traditional culture.”
* **What about free-trade? Foreign immigration?** Most economists have suggested that free-trade agreements and immigration from abroad help people *overall,* by lowering costs, increasing income, creating new jobs, and by making available a wider variety of goods and service for purchase. Immigration also serves to make our own culture more diverse, in precisely the sort of way Appiah values. Cosmopolitans are largely in favor of these policies. However, these sorts of policies also harm specific groups: by putting certain people out of work, by weakening the strength and influence of existing cultural or religious groups, and so on. Again, there is at least some tension between the cosmopolitan ideal of paying to attention to individual *people* (regardless of nationality) and the communitarian and fundamentalist idea that certain ways of life should somehow be protected by law.
* **When is it OK to go to war?** Appiah, like most cosmopolitans, warns against assuming that our culture is always right, and that those that disagree with us are wrong. This being said, cosmopolitans hold there are clearly some actions (such as slavery or genocide) that are simply wrong, even when they happen in different societies. Cosmopolitans hold that we might sometimes even be morally obliged to use military force to stop these things from happening. Figuring precisely when this is might be tricky—among other things, we need to make sure our plans for stopping the bad thing will actually *work*—but cosmopolitans do *not* accept the idea that “it’s none of our business” or “that’s just the way they do things over there.” In fact, a good cosmopolitan would say that, were our *own* country to engage in actions like this, we ought to welcome foreign intervention, since this would be the best thing for our citizens. Communitarians and fundamentalists might approach this question somewhat differently. A communitarian might be more likely to say “well, we need to let each culture do things their own way…”, while a fundamentalist might be prone to intervene in cases where a communitarian would not (i.e., in cases where the fundamentalist wanted to “improve” the other culture).

It’s important to note that this description of the debates leaves out lots of (relevant) details, and it’s likely that (on any particular issue), you’ll find cosmopolitans, communitarians, and fundamentalists defending a variety of views. Nevertheless, it’s important to recognize that the \*way\* these different views approach issues will affect the conclusions they come to.

## Review Questions

1. Explain the difference between cosmopolitanism, communitarianism, and fundamentalism. Then, choose a current political debate (see above for some examples), and show how each theory might approach it. Which approach do you think works best? Why?.
2. The distinctions between cosmopolitanism, communitarianism, and fundamentalism don’t match neatly on to our traditional ways of thinking about “left wing” versus “right wing” politics. With this in mind, take some time to explain your *own* political philosophy as it relates to these three categories. Make sure to give well-specified concrete examples, and to draw connections with the course material where appropriate.