



On This Topic

Comparative Perspectives on the Future of Cosmopolitanism

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Cosmopolitanism has received increasing attention in recent years as the global nature of the modern world and the multicultural dimensions of modern societies has become ever more salient. In a 1996 essay, Martha Nussbaum presented a contemporary Western liberal cosmopolitan theory, crafted on Kantian assumptions about the moral status and dignity of persons as rational moral agents. Her view was inspired by and traces its origin back to classical sources in the Western tradition and most prominently Diogenes of Sinope, who claimed to be “a citizen of the world.” While her account offers a powerful statement of an important and influential moral point of view, it also faces certain challenges, especially as a prescription for how to understand and navigate our global, multicultural world.

Another way cosmopolitanism has been understood is as offering an ideal view about the self and a personal moral stance toward other cultures and the people who live in such cultures. Unlike Nussbaum’s earlier essay, which regards cosmopolitanism as a moral theory, this second approach is founded on the central importance of the concrete particular features of different cultures in their unique and irreducible plurality. This is the conception of cosmopolitanism that informs and inspires a recent book by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*:

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** This work was supported by the *Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues* at Georgetown University. The following two articles, by Peng Guoxiang and Philip J. Ivanhoe, are part of a special issue publishing the results of the U.S.-China Research Group on Cosmopolitanism of Georgetown University (<https://uschinadialogue.georgetown.edu/topics/research-groupcosmopolitanism>). The remaining papers will appear in the next issue (Vol. 43) of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, along with a general response to all articles written by Owen Flanagan.

Ethics in a World of Strangers, in which he seeks to describe how one can live as what he calls a grounded cosmopolitanism: roughly, someone who embraces and remains committed to a home tradition or culture while working to understand and appreciate a range of other cultures and traditions in the wider world.

A third way to understand cosmopolitanism is to take it primarily as describing a political philosophy: a view about what nation states and their citizens owe to one another. A version of this general idea is found in the application of Rawls' conception of distributive justice, but in her more recent book, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Idea*, Nussbaum presses the case further, presenting it in terms of her "capabilities approach," in which guaranteeing that people are supplied with a range of material needs enables them to employ their inherent, basic capabilities in order to develop more complex capabilities that are needed to pursue and enjoy the full spectrum of human good. For our purposes, the important point is that cosmopolitanism is here conceived as a political theory whose characteristic feature is that all people have an equal claim not only to be treated with basic dignity but also to material assets, no matter their political relationship or citizenship.

Each of the three conceptions of cosmopolitanism described above contributes in significant ways to a more adequate and satisfying understanding of the global nature of the modern world and the multicultural dimensions of contemporary societies. Each can and some have been used as the basis for more critical-theory approaches to this general set of issues. One way these and other contemporary approaches to cosmopolitanism have been critiqued and criticized is by highlighting that they all arise from the Western philosophical tradition and employ its characteristic assumptions and approaches. In itself, this is not a criticism, but in light of several of the critiques raised above, it presents a *prima facie* case for concern and establishes an imperative to defend this exclusive and seemingly narrow and provincial starting assumption. Adding to such concerns is the fact that many other traditions of thought outside the Western tradition have produced alternative, powerful, and attractive ideas about the set of problems that define the family of theories we regard as

expressions of cosmopolitanism. For example, in China there is a long and rich tradition centered upon a range of alternative views that are conceptions of cosmopolitanism. For example, the idea of bringing “All Under Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) into harmonious union, that “all within the four seas are brothers (*sihai zhi nei jie xiongdi* 四海之內皆兄弟), that all human beings share the same basic nature (*benxing* 本性) and are “one body” (*yiti* 一體) with all people, creatures, and things, or that the goal of humanity is to realize the “Great Unity” (*datong* 大同), a notion that first appeared in the “Evolution of the Rites” (*Liyun* 禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites*, but that has been revised and advocated as a utopian ideal throughout history.

Over the course of the last four years, in a series of meetings in both China and the United States, the U.S.-China Research Group on Cosmopolitanism, supported and administered by the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University, has endeavored to not only offer critiques and criticisms of the reigning Western conceptions of cosmopolitanism but also to introduce new theories and visions of cosmopolitanism drawn from and inspired by Chinese sources and use these to broaden our conceptions of cosmopolitanism and thereby further the effort of understanding and navigating the global nature of the modern world and the multicultural dimensions of contemporary societies in order to enhance the lives of all-under-heaven. The articles published in this special issue of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* present essays selected from those presented in the course of our research group.