

On This Topic

# Varieties of Cosmopolitanism

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## I. Introduction

This special issue does something unique and important. Cosmopolitanism is a much-discussed topic in Western philosophy and is mostly framed in terms of vocabulary at home in Western tradition. The cosmopolitan is impressed by shared and priceless human dignity, and thinks it warrants impartial respect for human rights and attention to the well-being of all others no matter their geographical location. If they are anywhere on earth, we have obligations to them. Moral conceptions that are tribal in nature or parochial in scope are inferior to ones that consider the good of all humanity.

If cosmopolitanism is good, then it will also be good if the multiple powerful and long-lived traditions that do not speak in terms of universal rights and human dignity nonetheless have resources for cosmopolitan thinking, even if not in the same idiom.

Philip J. Ivanhoe and Peng Guoxiang have assembled a remarkable group of comparative philosophers who work on traditions from outside the Western philosophical lineages to engage in exactly this exercise. They have invited these scholars to reflect on what resources exist in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism that might support the cosmopolitan project. In addition to reflection on Confucian and Neo-

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\*\* Continuing from Vol. 42, this issue of the *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture* presents the remaining papers on the special topic of Cosmopolitanism, supported by the Initiative for U.S.-China Dialogue on Global Issues at Georgetown University. The previous issue featured contributions by Peng Guoxiang and Philip J. Ivanhoe, offering valuable perspectives. In Vol. 43, six additional articles explore the theme further, with a general response by Owen Flanagan to the discussions presented across both volumes.

Confucian sources (Philip J. Ivanhoe, David B. Wong, Justin Tiwald, Chenyang Li, Yong Li, Guoxiang Peng, JeeLoo Liu), we are treated to sustained discussions of the ways in which Daoism (David B. Wong), Buddhism (Ellen Y. Zhang), and even Mozi, support, embed, or advance various aspects of cosmopolitanism. A variety of powerful concepts—*ren*, *datong*, *tianxi*, *jian ai*, *dao*, *oneness*, *dukkha*, *karuna*, *metta*—are excavated to reveal the ways in which these traditions contain cosmopolitan features. My role is to offer reflections of this exercise.

This might seem an especially inauspicious time to theorize the nature, function, and value of cosmopolitanism, a bit like thinking that the ideal time to understand finally the nature of fire is as Rome burns. Whatever “cosmopolitanism” means or is, it is recessive in 2025 when focusing moral and political energy on making one’s own nation great again is the dominant international *zeitgeist*.

However, even if we live in a time in which being a cosmopolitan is often a pejorative, we also live in a time in which almost everyone in the world thinks that the weal and woe of all fellow humans matters, and that, in addition, all people have some sort of responsibility to the well-being of others. Understanding the causes and nature of fire may not save Rome, but it might help prevent future fires.

## II. Which Cosmopolitanism?

The authors assembled all think there are some positive features of cosmopolitanism as described in Western philosophy and thus think it would be good if Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, supported the cosmopolitan project in some way or other. But the word “cosmopolitan” is polysemous, and it can be hard to see which version of cosmopolitanism or which aspects of cosmopolitanism are thought to be worthy of support. We need to distinguish among its varieties, so that we can understand which conception of cosmopolitanism, if any, is considered worthy, a good idea.

The papers do not always specify which version of cosmopolitanism they are addressing or analyzing. However, almost without exception,

they claim that Confucianism and other traditions entail or supports a moderate or humanistic cosmopolitanism, but not a radical cosmopolitanism. Radical cosmopolitanism is never explicitly defined. But some contenders for the radical versions include views such as that there are no special duties to loved ones and fellow citizens; that the only duties are impartial ones; and that constant redistribution of wealth inside and between states is morally required.

One concern is that the issue is framed in some of the papers as about the degree to which Confucianism, along with other traditions, endorse care and concern for others outside the self, one's family, one's nation, and so on. It is good when an ethical theory endorses care and concern for others. Every ethical theory ever known does so—a few for prudential reasons only. But since not every ethical theory is cosmopolitan this alone should not be enough to make Confucianism et al. a variety of moderate or humanistic cosmopolitanism. Or, if it is enough, then this is a surprising finding. I invite the reader think about this.

### **III. The Semantic Neighborhood**

In philosophy and political theory, “cosmopolitanism” lives in a semantic neighborhood with other familiar concepts. When cosmopolitanism is discussed, these concepts will almost invariably come up either as friendly or unfriendly ones. It may well be, although I do not explore it here, that the meaning of cosmopolitan requires theorizing that incorporates all these other concepts in a holistic way.

Nationalism	Universal Dignity	Pluralism	Citizen/Neighbor
Patriotism	Universal Rights	Multiculturalism	Non-citizen
Loyalty	Impartiality	Globalism	Alien
Allegiance	Respect	Internationalism	Stranger

Most cosmopolitans frame the view in terms of duties and obligations to others based on universal dignity, rights, and worth, and as a challenge to certain kinds of nationalism and isolationism. The worrisome kinds of these are ones that are tribal and do not consider the good of non-citizens, aliens, strangers, sometimes even enemies. Of course, there are times when the other is a genuine existential threat, which is why a cosmopolitan cannot be against all kinds of nationalism, patriotism, and isolationism.

One challenge to cosmopolitanism is that the requirement that we have moral concern for the flourishing of all others, might sometimes entail supporting peoples whose conception of the good differs dramatically from our own. As long as the other form of life does not involve the inversion of all our cherished values, this will not normally be a problem unless one is overconfident in one's form of life and holds some weird version of moral realism. This is not the place to explore these matters. I simply mark them for relevance.

#### **IV. Varieties of Cosmopolitanism**

Let's distinguish among six varieties of cosmopolitanism, and locate the assembled papers in terms of the variety(ies) they think is worth aiming at. All these varieties make appearances in the papers in this issue. However, most focus on (3) *multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitanism* or (4) *moral/ethical cosmopolitanism*. These six varieties are not entirely independent of each other. For example, (4) *moral/ethical cosmopolitanism* normally motivates (5) *political cosmopolitanism*. (3) *Multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitanism* and (4) *moral/ethical cosmopolitanism* are pretty independent of each other.

1. *Identity Cosmopolitanism*
2. *Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism*
3. *Multicultural/ Pluralistic Cosmopolitanism*
4. *Moral/Ethical Cosmopolitanism*
5. *Political Cosmopolitanism*
6. *Prudential Cosmopolitanism*

## **A. Identity Cosmopolitanism**

According to lore, the fourth century BCE Cynic Diogenes, was the first person to use the word “cosmopolitan,” perhaps the first non-alienated individual to think the concept. When asked where he was from, Diogenes answers that he is kosmopolitês, a citizen of the world. Diogenes’s answer is surprising (and annoying) because he does not answer the “where are you from?” question in the normal way by explaining where he was born or lives. He answers by saying something cryptic and surprising about how he self-conceives, which suggests something yet-to-be explained about his loyalties and allegiances. Diogenes used a new word kosmopolitês in an attempt to invent a new concept. What exactly is the concept? What does kosmopolitês mean? Diogenes could not have meant that he was literally “a citizen of the world” since there was, when he spoke, no world-state that conferred citizenship separate from or superseding citizenship in some particular polis, state, or nation.

The first observation is that Diogenes conception of his identity, of who he is, is not idle. It supports a moral and political attitude that is not entirely specified but has been worked out in various ways by consequentialists, deontologists, and social contract theorists. The sense of identity that is cosmopolitan is one where one conceives of oneself for moral and political purposes as a human being—an identity shared with all other human beings. I say “for moral and political purposes,” because if Diogenes truly thinks he is not from Sinope and not formed by his family, polis, and so on, he is mistaken or confused and lacks self-understanding. His claim that he is kosmopolitês must be read as some sort of normative identity claim. The normative identity claim entails identification with the weal and woe of all other humans in virtue of shared humanity. All the papers in this volume, think that the traditions discussed have multiple resources that teach that humans form one family, the family of human beings (see especially Ivanhoe and Tiwald).

It is an interesting and important question whether one conceives the shared feature of common humanity as simple species membership, as an aspect of shared nature—*dukkha*, the capacity to suffer, say, or

as a shared human nature characterized in terms of Mencian sprouts, or finally as a shared form of life. If the feature is the last one, then the facts of pluralism and moral and political disagreement might undercut the sense of commonality.

One might think that this cosmopolitan sense of identity as a citizen of the world competes with contemporary identitarian politics, where each person is encouraged to self-conceive in terms of their unique intersectional features. I am a white, Catholic, American, male, father, grandfather, married, elder. You are something else. It remains to be seen whether humans going forward can think of themselves for everyday purposes and for self-understanding in all their glorious particularity, and at the same time, and for other purposes—moral and political ones—as sharing what matters most with all others, common humanity. Thinking of identity in both ways at once might be cognitively challenging; but it is not impossible. Perhaps it is worth cultivating. Liu, Ivanhoe, and Tiwald have helpful things to say about extending concern to others, and some psychological obstacles to so doing. However, I am not sure that any strong version of identity cosmopolitanism is defended in any of the papers. In other words, no one defends or claims to locate in any Confucian, Neo-Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist sources the claim that the right way to self-conceive is literally a “citizen of the world,” only that identifying as a member of the community of humans, understanding that we share fate, and displaying care and concern for the well-being of all others is for the best.

## **B. Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism**

The most common meaning of “cosmopolitan” in America, perhaps in the North Atlantic more generally, is that a cosmopolitan is a person who is sophisticated, well-traveled, and conversant with and appreciative of other cultures. The cosmopolitan is different from the adventurer, who travels the world for the beauty, thrills, and experience of nature. And she is different from the anthropologically curious individual who travels with an explicit strategy of *verstehen*—participant observation—in other cultures. The cosmopolitan of this

sort typically visits cities, not rural areas; but she is often opinionated about how people live and think in rural areas. Her magazines are *Conde Naste Traveler and Travel + Leisure*. If you want to know what a cosmopolitan in this sense looks like and what she thinks about when she is not enacting her cosmopolitanism, there is also a magazine for that, aptly called *Cosmopolitan*, which pitches itself as *The Women's Magazine for Fashion, Sex Advice, Dating Tips, and Celebrity News*.

Cosmopolitanism in this sense refers to a lifestyle and a set of elite attitudes. Such cosmopolitans are well-off, a necessary condition for being so well-traveled. They are politically progressive. They think that most ordinary folk, at home and abroad, are sweet and dear. They claim to get them, and can explain why they lack, shall we say, global understanding. Ordinary folk are parochial; the cosmopolitan is not. The cosmopolitan in this sense is first and foremost an aesthete, although she may judge herself to be worth listening to on economic, moral, and political matters in virtue of her cosmopolitanism. This kind of aesthetic cosmopolitan is elite and effete. Philip J. Ivanhoe rightly says that the true cosmopolitan “is not a cultural tourist.” The trouble is that the conception of the cosmopolitan as “a cultural tourist” is now very powerful; so powerful that the word “cosmopolitan” may not be a winner, serviceable to announce a view that commands wide agreement, even if the concept of cosmopolitanism is winning in practice.

### **C. Multicultural/Pluralistic Cosmopolitanism**

The multicultural cosmopolitan is well-depicted in Ivanhoe's paper where he describes “the cosmopolitan guest” who contrasts with the aesthetic cosmopolitan, “the cultural tourist.” Ivanhoe writes: “A cosmopolitan guest is not just passing through or observing other people and cultures for personal pleasure or enjoyment; they are seeking to understand, appreciate, and learn from—not merely about—the people and places they visit.” The multicultural or pluralist cosmopolitan, as I conceive them analytically, takes the fact of pluralism seriously, and does not expect there to be convergence on the right set of values or the right way to live. The multicultural cosmopolitan acknowledges that given pluralism, there will be intra-

mural and extramural conflicts and thinks that tools such as accommodation (David B. Wong) and harmonizing (David B. Wong and Chenyang Li) will need to play an important role in national and international relations. David B. Wong, in particular, suggests that “orthodox cosmopolitanism” expects significant value convergence, some sort of homogeneous practices and values, which he thinks we ought not expect realistically. Ivanhoe also demurs on this expectation of homogeneity, as do I. However, if there is such an orthodox cosmopolitanism that expects homogeneity, then according to Guoxiang Peng, Confucius is vulnerable to being read as one, since although he was much interested in learning about the ways of others, he thought it best if his conception of a good life spread throughout the world. On this reading, Confucius himself was not a multicultural cosmopolitan, but rather a parochial thinker. This issue is not unique to Confucius. Most every ethical tradition ever invented has been overly impressed by itself, and at least dreamed that it be the right universal one.

I assume with Wong and Ivanhoe that there is irreducible and ineliminable pluralism. There is no one right ethical view. Those of us who favor and endorse multicultural education agree that the respectful and humble attitude towards pluralism is to seek to learn from others’ insights into living well, and locating values in other cultures and traditions that we would do well to advance for ourselves.

#### **D. Moral/Ethical Cosmopolitanism**

So far, we have *identity cosmopolitanism*, where an individual conceives of who they are in terms of a common feature—humanity—they share with all others; *aesthetic cosmopolitanism* where one enjoys and appreciates other cultures, and self-conceives as refined and worldly because of this understanding; and, *multicultural cosmopolitanism*, where one aims to seriously study other traditions for the sake of solving one’s own problems and doing things better. None of these three varieties entail anything at all about responsibility to others. Moral cosmopolitanism expresses this moral impulse to care for all humans.



Moral cosmopolitanism itself comes in varieties that can be described first pass entirely in term of mental states:

- A moral cosmopolitan has a standing *desire* that everyone flourishes no matter their temporal or spatial location on Earth.
- A moral cosmopolitan has a standing *belief* that everyone has/should have the same right/chance to flourish no matter their temporal or spatial location on Earth.
- A moral cosmopolitan regularly entertains and approves of *the thought* that it would be ideal if everyone flourished.
- A moral cosmopolitan is *skeptical* about some forms of familism, nationalism, and patriotism because they can undermine desires, beliefs, and policies motivated by equal concern the well-being of all humans.

As described so far, the moral cosmopolitan is psychologically committed to the well-being of everyone on earth. It is not yet clear what the psychological commitment comes to in practice. At a minimum, we might expect something like this additional commitment:

- A moral cosmopolitan is committed to *actions* and *policies* that increase chances of everyone flourishing regardless of location.

All the papers in this issue are committed to some version (Yong Li might be an exception; and Wong's Zhuangzi is a skeptic about the prospects of wide care) of moral cosmopolitanism so described. And they argue effectively that Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism endorse some version of moral cosmopolitanism. In the Confucian case, it is care according to the graded love scheme; in Buddhism, it is wide compassion for the suffering of all sentient beings.

### **E. Political Cosmopolitanism**

One concern about *moral cosmopolitanism* is practical. Perhaps, some billionaires can do things that might actually improve the situations of

distant or future others; but most individuals cannot. Realistically, you and I cannot. This is the message of bumper stickers that say “Think globally, act locally.” The political cosmopolitan takes this problem seriously and believes that the only practical way to enact moral cosmopolitanism is political. There are two main ways to do this. One is for the governments of particular nation states to understand that it is the will of its people to favor policies that express and enact care and concern for human beings in other nation states when they suffer or are in great need. The second is to establish international institutions, the United Nations, the Hague, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that are explicitly dedicated to providing aid and protecting international law.

I describe the situation in terms of suffering or great need because no nation state and no international institution that I am aware of is committed to sharing resources to make sure that all the members of other nations positively flourish, or, what is different, to make everyone economically or materially equal (this is so even inside every existing national state). The usual move is to provide a picture of a bottom (of food, potable water, etc.) below which no one should fall, and a safety net to prevent anyone going below that bottom so that at least the bare possibility of a decent life exists. This requires nation states and global institutions to redistribute resources to other nation states when there are emergencies with respect to basic necessities. It also involves sacrifice and cooperation on problems like pollution, climate change, and the food supply, which are understood by everyone to be objectively global in a truly interconnected world such as ours.

I said there are no states or international institutions which work to enact policies and share resources with complete impartiality in order to achieve material equality. There are some ethical conceptions that can be read as recommending that we ought to do so. These include certain extremely demanding versions of consequentialism, Buddhism, Mohism, and communism. The Confucian and Neo-Confucian traditions help explain why there are no existing governments or international institutions committed to complete impartiality across borders. We are sensibly equipped by nature and culture with circumstances that initially favor partial love, which we then learn to extend to others.

But for a host of sensible practical and developmental reasons, care, concern, and compassion allow assigning extra weight to one's own good, that of one's family, etc. Weighting is not trumping. Weighting is read by mature persons as an invitation to harmonize, coordinate, and accommodate my legitimate desires and needs with the equally important needs and demands of others.

One question that arises for the *political cosmopolitan* is whether common humanity is sufficient to warrant aid or whether it can be conditional on the mutuality of cooperation and on such matters as whether we approve of your values, economic practices, and form of life generally.

Yong Li argues that *tianxia* warrants a hierarchical global order in which more moral states, not simply more powerful states, rule others. If political cosmopolitanism requires aid solely in virtue of common humanity and suffering, then this sort of *tianxia* world order is not a form of political cosmopolitanism (See Guoxiang Peng for a critique of Yong Li's understanding of *tianxia*). It is a fact however that many nations form alliances at least partly based on shared religions, political forms, etc., which track homogeneity of values, not simply shared humanity. Then again in truly dire circumstances humanitarian aid does flow to the civilians of enemy states and failing states, which shows the power of the shared human family idea if and when suffering is great.

## **F. Prudential Cosmopolitanism**

I described *political cosmopolitanism* as involving outsourcing responsibilities for the well-being of fellow human beings outside one's nation state to political institutions because they are the only units that can effectively do so. The political institutions claim that providing aid is a legitimate role and responsibility because it reflects the moral cosmopolitanism of its people or in the case of the UN and similar organizations, the moral cosmopolitanism of confederations of people. The papers in this issue all explain how there are powerful resources for moral cosmopolitanism in East Asia and South Asian philosophical traditions. And this allows, although it doesn't entail,

political cosmopolitanism.

Realistically speaking, however, the motives for providing aid for the well-being of others beyond nation state borders is often prudential, or at least partly so. Scholars who have looked at the development of “poor laws” and social welfare in nineteenth-century Europe notice two things in transcripts of legislators. There is about a 50/50 split in discussions of welfare as a moral duty of Christians *and* as a matter of prudence and public safety to avoid disease, crime, and rebellions of the poor. If the prudential and public safety reasons had been enough to warrant the welfare state, we would have a pure case of prudential cosmopolitanism.

In an interconnected world, reasons of prudence and reasons of morality converge. The fact that there are many reasons besides moral ones that influence and guide human behavior is only a disappointment to those who fantasize that humans are angels, not animals made of admixtures of self-interest and fellow feeling. The prudential cosmopolitan thinks it is for the best, in the interest of peace, harmony, safety, to attend to the flourishing/well-being of other people. We also have convivial desires that fellow humans do well, flourish.

In sum, the papers in this volume collectively advance the view that there are multiple sources inside the traditions discussed that advance the project of *moral/ethical cosmopolitanism*. In the Confucian and Neo-Confucian cases, there is also insistence that national governments, modeling themselves on the behavior of the sage kings, ought to be impartial in matters that pertain to the succor of their own people. Since all the theories discussed are pre-modern, it is no weakness that they do not have robust resources to discuss international relations and thus to advance the project of *political or prudential cosmopolitanism* across national borders. But there are many hints about how the political and prudential versions might receive support.

## V. Conclusion

I conclude with a reflection that pertains to the matter of multiculturalism and pluralism. Several papers, Ivanhoe and Wong in particular, advance *multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitanism*. They recommend humility about one's own way of living, and openness to learning from others. This is exactly the right advice.

I said earlier that *multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitanism* is independent of the five other kinds of cosmopolitanism. One could believe contra the multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitan that although there are plural theories of the good and many functional political regimes, there ought not to be. The world ought to converge on the one true theory. This is the demand for homogeneity. Many ethical and political traditions have advocated homogeneity. And thus there are cosmopolitans in the moral and political senses who are not *multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitans*. In fact, there is the view that one ought to seek homogeneity not because it will be best if one finds the one true theory; but only that it will make life and international relations smoother if everyone converges on some view or other that is shared (truth aside). Independence means one could logically reject *multicultural/pluralistic cosmopolitanism* and accept all the other cosmopolitan theses.

The worry I want to develop that is hinted at, or more than hinted at in Ivanhoe and Wong, has to do with the question of whether the way care and concern are theorized in cosmopolitan circles is actually not genuinely cosmopolitan, but rather embeds a parochial normative conception, specifically one associated with the project of the enlightenment. To put the challenge in stark form consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Ivanhoe (discussing Nussbaum's views) writes of the UDHR:

It has become increasingly clear that such an approach remains bound to a particular strain of Western moral theory that has proven to be controversial and appears to some as quite provincial. If this is what cosmopolitanism means, then from a practical point of view, it is something that much of the world does not accept—and that includes

many people in Western liberal societies such as the United States. Advocating for such a form of cosmopolitanism can seem like and perhaps inevitably involves imposing one (sub)-culture's values on the world.

One way to put Ivanhoe's challenge is this way: the UDHR, especially its Preamble, uses a language familiar from the European enlightenment of dignity, worth, and rights. This is not the vocabulary that most ethical traditions use to specify matters of utmost importance. If, however, *moral* and *political cosmopolitanism* endorse international aid primarily to protect inalienable rights of propertied people, then this might mean they are dedicated to care and concern about others based on a parochial view about what matters most to them. Perhaps universal rights don't matter most to most people. I might like you to give me \$500 rather than fussing about my free speech or freedom of religion.

This is an interesting and important concern, and there is something to it. One way to mitigate the concern is to point out that semantics aside, and even among skeptics about universal and inalienable human rights (which includes most consequentialists), there is an unforced consensus that the bottom line expressions of what are called "rights" in the UDHR express things that are normally worth protecting and are understood across many traditions to be minimal necessary conditions of flourishing, even if they are not conceived as inalienable or universal or God-given. The fact that by now, although not originally, all 194 countries in the UN are signatories to treaties that express agreement with the UDHR gives a modicum of support to this interpretation.

A somewhat easier case can be made that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals passed unanimously in 2015 by the United Nations do not even semantically favor the final vocabulary of any particular people or tradition and instead express what everyone agrees, across every tradition, are necessary conditions of human flourishing, peace, food security, education, no sexual slavery, climate and gender justice. The SDGs overlap considerably with the capabilities approach which focuses on necessary conditions for human flourishing no matter what

parochial tradition one abides. Maybe.

I mark this issue. It is important. *Moral, political, and prudential cosmopolitanism* require specifying not only that we ought to show care and concern for others beyond national borders, but also how substantively to do that. To what extent should the cosmopolitan support the best life for all as different people conceive it, or is it legitimate morally and politically to support the best life for others as we, the more powerful, conceive it? Power tends to operate in the latter way, rather than the former way. And thus deep normative analysis and critique are essential if the various cosmopolitan projects are to avoid the dangers of creating homogeneity where none is needed or advisable.