Cosmopolitan Education and Its Discontents

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In this essay I argue that cosmopolitan educators and their critics have been talking at cross purposes, and I indicate common tasks to which both groups can contribute.

Philosophical cosmopolitans advance theses about justice and culture.¹ The thesis about justice is that the notion of justice applies to the entire human community, rather than just to territorial nations or sub-groups; all humans are equally considered to be bearers of universal moral, political and social rights. Cosmopolitanism about justice is an ideal that is meant to guide institutional development, governance policy, and education.² The strong cosmopolitan thesis states that the human community is the sole group to which the notion of justice applies, with all of the more particular justice claims being justified only on the basis of universal principles. Moderate versions of the thesis allow that the human community is one important arena of justice, though considerations of justice that are not subsumable under universal moral norms can apply to various subcommunities.

The cosmopolitan thesis about culture³ holds that individuals can successfully shape life plans and shoulder moral responsibilities by drawing from diverse cultural values and practices, and that education should thus make available rich multicultural resources and contacts.⁴ The strong version of the thesis is that only lives constructed around such cosmopolitan life plans and identities — that is, only cosmopolitan lives — can flourish in the contemporary world; moderate versions state that while lives embedded in narrow communities can flourish, cosmopolitan lives can flourish at least as well, and thus there is no unique value benefit inhering in narrow cultural identities.

COSMOPOLITAN UNIVERSALISM IN ETHICS, POLITICS, AND EDUCATION

MARTHA NUSSBAUM’S MORAL UNIVERSALISM

Much continuing interest in moral and political cosmopolitanism derives from Martha Nussbaum’s seminal essay “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism.”⁵ Drawing from cosmopolitan thinkers from the Stoics through Kant, Nussbaum advances a strong cosmopolitan universalism that views attachments and special obligations to family, friends, neighbors, coreligionists, and compatriots to be morally arbitrary and trumped by universal moral principles. She defines a cosmopolitan as a “citizen of the world…whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world,” whose “first allegiance is to what is morally good,” to what can therefore be commended “to all human beings” in terms of “what we share as rational and mutually dependent human beings.” Drawing upon Stoic moralists, Nussbaum says that in our deliberations “we should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect.”⁶

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In *Cultivating Humanity*, her extended essay on cosmopolitan education, Nussbaum continues to focus on abstract rationality: universal moral principles and rational moral argument grounded in them. The purpose of education is to promote “critical thought and respectful judgment.... Above all, we can teach [our students] how to argue, rigorously and critically.... We have not produced truly free citizens unless we have produced people who can reason for themselves and argue well, who understand the difference between logically valid and logically invalid argument.” A student participating in cosmopolitan education will learn much about her own community and the communities of others, but the emphasis throughout will not be on their differences but on their fundamental commonality: “She must learn enough about the different to recognize common aims, aspirations, and values, and enough about these common ends to see how variously they are instantiated in the many cultures and many histories.”

Despite Nussbaum’s use of the language of citizenship, ordinarily conceived as a political status, the form of cosmopolitanism she advances is moral rather than political. Following the Stoics, Nussbaum argues that “it is the human community that is most fundamentally the source of our moral obligations.” The Stoics conceived individuals as citizens of two communities, one being an actually existing *polis* or political community of birth or residence with its own local norms, and the other a “community of human argument and aspiration that is [quoting Seneca] ‘truly great and truly common.’” Our first loyalty is to the latter; we should give our moral allegiance to “no mere form of government, no temporal power, but to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings.” Situating cosmopolitan norms beyond the world of actually existing political communities distinguishes Nussbaum’s formulations as moral rather than political.

**David Held’s Political Cosmopolitanism**

Unlike Nussbaum, many political philosophers have extended moral universalism to the political realm. David Held, for example, has advanced a “cosmopolitan democracy” project extending cosmopolitan universalism to politics by grounding prescriptions for contemporary political institutions upon theoretical moral foundations.

Held’s project aims to achieve a world order based on the rule of law and democracy. As Held’s colleague Janna Thompson puts it, “The political aim of cosmopolitanism is to bring about a world society [where] principles and human rights can be universally recognized and honored.” Significantly, this transforms cosmopolitanism from a regulative ideal into an end- in-view.

Held opposes both neoliberal globalists and communitarians. The neoliberals push for market globalization that is regulated in the interest of market actors by transnational regulatory institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, without any commitment to equal justice and democratic accountability. The communitarians reject universal moral principles, claiming that the moral sphere is constituted by claims, understandings, and loyalties particular to the specific moral communities where members form their primary identities.
For Held, cosmopolitan democracy stands for a set of principles that articulate the equal moral status of each human being, the necessity of the consent of the governed, and the management of collective differences through democracy. Institutionally, cosmopolitan democracy involves the establishment of political authority and administrative capacity at transnational regional and global levels in order to supplement democratic institutions at the level of nation-states. In terms of economic justice, Held’s form of cosmopolitanism shares with neoliberalism commitments to both economic growth and the enhancement of productivity and wealth enabled by contemporary technology. But, unlike neoliberalism, it also addresses extremes of poverty and seeks to create organizational avenues in which the voices of ordinary people can be heard and rendered politically effective beyond the nation. This means that market regulation has to be calibrated with poverty reduction programs and the protection of the most vulnerable members of the global society.

On this view, cosmopolitan citizenship is based on general rules and principles of democracy and human rights that can be applied at various levels (local, national, regional, and global). A citizen education program like Nussbaum’s, but bolstered by the political skills required for institution building and political negotiation, is required to support it.

**Criticisms of Cosmopolitan Universalism**

There is a large and growing internal literature in normative ethics, political theory and international relations, comprising both debates among various stronger and more moderate versions of moral and political cosmopolitanism and attempts to construct projects and policies. At the margins of these debates, however, postmodernists, feminists, and pragmatists have completely rejected cosmopolitan universalism, and it is to the first two of these groups of critics that I now turn.

**Postmodernist Critiques**

To provide a brief definitional background, postmodernism is a contemporary philosophical critique of Enlightenment assumptions; it offers “a criticism of reason, regarded as a universal and certain foundation for knowledge and ethics.” Rather, it breaks up any general notion of “reasoning” into multiple context-dependent forms, undercutting notions of a “common reason, common world, or common humanity.”

The postmodern critique of cosmopolitanism is both epistemological and ethical. Universal reason, postmodernists have argued, is itself, paradoxically, a *particular* conceptual notion with its own unrecognized limitations and exclusions. Moral notions from the Enlightenment sound natural, universal, and self-evident to modern ears, but they have their own origins, histories, uses and, effects; they are cultural constructs embedded within contingent and historically specific assemblages of discourses and practices, to which their meanings are tied. To speak the familiar universal language, therefore, is by that very act to legitimate it and to smuggle in the associated practices with their built-in knowledge/power relations. The Enlightenment concepts are embodied, as Michel Foucault explains, within an
“apparatus,” a system of elements, a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions.” It was in the name of universal reason, for example, that “enlightened” Europeans justified their “civilizing” apparatuses of domination, enslavement, and even elimination of the “unenlightened” peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Postmodern critics argue that to carry Enlightenment notions of universal reason into the projected future uncritically is to obscure the power relations built into these apparatuses, and thus both to limit radically our imaginations and to risk duplicating moral offenses in the future. In place of universal ethical reason, postmodernists urge an ethics of active, nondomineering receptivity to and respect for others in their particularity, alongside a politics of open possibility rather than conceptual and practical closure.

A powerful critique of political cosmopolitan universalism along these lines is presented by Charles Tully, who begins his discussion of global citizenship education by distinguishing two meanings of “citizenship,” which he calls modern and diverse. The modern sense, so called because of its emergence within the modern nation-state, takes political institutions as the primary reference point, and considers citizenship to be a status within these institutions. In this modern sense, world citizenship is a status in projected global political institutions. The diverse sense, so called because of its attention to the multiple forms of citizen activity, takes individual and group actors as the primary reference point, with political institutions seen as secondary, growing up only contingently around actors and their projects. The modern sense thinks of citizens in terms of institutional rights and duties, and sees active citizen participation as voluntary. The diverse sense defines citizenship in terms of participative actions, capabilities, and arts of many different sorts. Modern citizenship is a structure of power that domesticates citizens to coercive state institutions; diverse citizenship liberates and democratizes them.

Tully’s notion of diverse citizenship is meant to emphasize the differences among civic actors and their projects, and thus to open up our imagination to the multiplicity of possible future institutional forms that can build up around them. In line with postmodern critiques, Tully argues that modern citizenship has a specific history in the development of what Foucault calls the apparatus of the modern nation-state and in the gradual development of civil, political, social, and cultural rights. What the standard liberal universalist account of the historical development of these citizen rights obscures is that their establishment was not inevitable, but contingent, and, most significantly, was not an unqualified good because it required the prior elimination of other valued goods, such as, for example, local forms of governance with their traditional rights, the commons and pre-modern forms of subsistence, and ways of life grounded in ethnic communities prior to their incorporation in nation-states. Taken-for-granted modern values are thus embedded in the modern apparatus, and are inescapably but invisibly dependent upon the
destruction of valued alternative ways of life and alternative cultural values. The projection of modern values and practices into the future, as exhibited in Held’s global extension of twentieth century social democracy, in turn obscures alternative possibilities and thus makes impossible a fair consideration of their potential value.

For Tully, the globalization of democratic citizenship as proposed by Held imposes modern citizenship as a universal template for world governance institutions. Multiple forms of diverse citizenship are also emerging, however, due to a renaissance of local forms of active civic life with their federations and networks. Thinking of citizen education in terms of diverse citizenship avoids the mistake of projecting one particular institutionalized form of governance from the present to the future as the universal model. While modern citizenship remains focused on political institutions, diverse citizenship looks to multiple potential relationships of solidarity, friendship, mutual aid, and the associated dispositions and arts that can be developed through moral and political education. While cosmopolitan universalism remains focused on restoring and universalizing modern citizenship in global society, diverse citizenship offers a framework for thinking about various ways of moving beyond it in the increasingly global world situation.

Thomas Popkewitz’s argument against cosmopolitan education is similar. He says, “Cosmopolitanism, despite its universal pretensions, embodies particular inclusions and exclusions” occurring through the inscription of distinctions between those who do and those who do not “embody principles of cosmopolitan civility and normalcy.” Cosmopolitan pedagogy, for Popkewitz, fabricates principles of reflection and participation that “shred provincial values in the name of universal cosmopolitan values.” This pedagogy is thus a disciplinary regime that constructs the governable global citizen subject. It recreates within public education the polarity of “enlightened” and “unenlightened” groups, and then subjects the latter to special “civilizing” pedagogical treatments and disciplinary regimes that supposedly “enlighten” them but in fact render them not just different but “abject.”

Popkewitz urgently insists he is not arguing against reason or participation in the struggle for a more humane and just world, but just the opposite. Like Tully, he aims to “unthink what seems natural” in order to “open other possibilities of schooling, teaching, and teacher education” where reason and justice function within local practices that do not differentiate their participants as abject and wretched.

Feminist Cosmopolitan Alternatives

Like communitarians and postmodernists, feminist philosophers have raised awareness of the situated and perspectival nature of moral judgments, and have attended to the historical contexts of ethical viewpoints. Many feminists of the 1980s and 1990s were also directly influenced by postmodernist ideas; for them, patriarchy, the bias that understands “human” experiences and understandings exclusively from the vantage point of the male hierarchy, has been as much a part of the modern knowledge/power apparatus as class domination, racism, colonialism, and slavery. Universalism in ethics, on this view, thus smuggles in male domination as part of that...
apparatus. Feminists have sought, along lines similar to Tully’s inquiry into citizenship, to recover earlier ideas and practices of gender roles and relations, and to study their destruction by the imposition of a taken-for-granted regime of modern gender relations, in order to open up alternative visions of justice.

A brief historical background: Contemporary feminist ethics had important starting points in the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. Responding to Lawrence Kohlberg’s model of universal moral development, in which reasoning on the basis of universal moral principles of justice represented the highest stage of development, Gilligan asserted that the evolution of girls’ moral reasoning was different and had a different end point. Girls did not develop to Kohlberg’s highest stage as frequently as boys, Gilligan found, and she asserted that this was not because they remained undeveloped, but rather because they developed in the direction of an orientation not to abstract justice but to particular caring relationships. Gilligan thus proposed that fundamental ethical principles are not universal but gender-specific. Noddings, in turn, developed a comprehensive ethics of care, intended not so much to inform abstract ethical reasoning, but to guide particular caring relationships. Annette Baier also argued for an ethics that extended beyond abstract justice to care.

Once ethics was bifurcated in this way, various attempts were made to construct justice-care syntheses. But what began as a distinction between two gendered ethical orientations was soon converted into a hierarchy, as some feminist ethicists argued that the particularist care orientation associated with women was not just valid on its own terms, but morally superior to the universalist justice orientation. Margaret Urban Walker, for example, took feminism as a “profound and original rebellion against the regnant paradigms of moral knowledge.” She argued not for a justice-care synthesis but for a radically alternative, antiuniversalist moral epistemology, because, in its striving for generality, the justice orientation abstracts from the particularity of concrete persons who are objects of our moral concern, while the care orientation, by avoiding generalization, provides a sensitive attention to those particular individuals. This hierarchical approach elevating care above justice lies behind some current feminist thinking about cosmopolitanism.

Fiona Robinson, for example, argues that Nussbaum’s and others’ cosmopolitan universalisms are incompatible with feminism, but that this incompatibility does not preclude feminism from embracing cosmopolitanism’s extension of moral concern and action beyond the borders of particular cultural and national communities. Moral recognition beyond these boundaries, she asserts, does not imply “‘certain universal categories’ such as ‘universal humanity.’” Rather, an ethics of care in world situations can assist in “recogniz[ing] others” and thus analyzing and constructing nuanced policies based on that recognition.

The educational philosopher Sharon Todd takes a similar viewpoint; accepting as a given that feminism and cosmopolitan universalism are incompatible, Todd constructs new meanings for both “cosmopolitanism” and “educating humanity” that back away from their universalist connotations. She takes cosmopolitanism as
invoking “openness to the indefinite” that “gestures to an unknown” beyond the nation-state or any other defined form of association. Thus any definition of “cosmopolitanism” is itself “uncosmopolitan.”

Drawing from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Todd then reconceives the project of educating humanity as preparing students to recognize the radical otherness and ultimate incomprehensibility of others. In stark contrast to Nussbaum’s prescription to see the commonalities behind every difference, Todd urges us to uncover hidden differences behind every assumed commonality.

BEYOND THE UNTENABLE DUALISM OF UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR

Rather than accepting the opposition between universal justice and particularist care approaches to cosmopolitan ethics and education as ultimate, however, cosmopolitan philosophers might find it useful to revisit earlier attempts to construct a justice-care synthesis. A useful point of departure is Ralph Lindgren, who, starting from the reasonable idea that some combination or synthesis of the two approaches might be better than a blanket opposition, sets out what he calls a “repertoire dualism” in which justice and care orientations are limit points on a universal-particular spectrum of patterns of moral perception and response, where the underlying shared commitment is to fostering conditions of humane and dignified life. Like the various tools in a toolbox, justice and care are, on this view, moral instruments adjusted to different problems. Ceding the centrality of caring relationships to the moral life, Lindgren argues that abstract general notions are nonetheless necessary, among other reasons because (1) communication between caregiver and cared-for is a precondition of attention to the cared-for’s needs, and that communication in turn presupposes some background of general understandings and conventions; and (2) due to limitations of time, energy, and attention, moral agents cannot afford to give close personal attention to all those for whom they have moral concern and responsibility, and so they must use blueprints, plans, and formulas that abstract from the particularity of those others affected by their judgments and actions.

Lindgren’s position is echoed in a recent article by educational philosopher Marianna Papastephanou. Papastephanou argues against Todd that the conflict between universal thinking and particular attention is contingent; it is tied not to the concept of cosmopolitanism itself but to some prior conceptions of cosmopolitanism that could be revised or abandoned. Recalling Lindgren, she says that the alleged conflict between universal and particular has been “produced by failures…to theorize the dual demand for universality and particularity adequately,” and that contra Todd, the “double demand” — recognizing a place for both — does not, as Todd claims, “inevitably create a contradictory logic.”

Particularity is not the opposite of universality…but rather a subset of it. Rather than being in endemic tension, particularity and universality are interconnected and equally present in [a reconstructed] cosmopolitan ethics…the problem is how we define cosmopolitanism.

GLANCING BLOWS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The arguments of Lindgren and Papastephanou seem irrefutable from a logical point of view. However, because they fail to address directly the association that is asserted between moral universalism and institutions of hierarchy and patriarchy,
they have been unsuccessful in freeing many feminist particularist ethicists from their aversion to universal notions. This is confirmed by the ongoing appearance of new cosmopolitan particularisms, such as those of Robinson and Todd, almost two decades after Lindgren set out the case for regarding the dichotomy between universalism and particularism in ethics as an untenable dualism.

A related problem is that philosophers and educational theorists who have opted for universalism have not taken postmodern or second-stage feminist views seriously. Instead they dismiss them as forms of “relativism” that confuse reason with its abuses. This dismissal presupposes that reason and its abuses can be readily teased apart, a view that the studies of Tully, Kennedy, and Popkewitz all seriously call into question. If the notions of “reason” and “justice” have been given particular meanings by their specific historical uses in the apparatuses of modern social life, as postmodernists and feminists claim, then what is needed to breathe new life into them is not just better conceptual definitions, as Papastephanou suggests, but better postmodern practices free from the contamination of these meanings. The valid uses of abstract reasoning and universal categories in moral thinking need to be disentangled from morally questionable practices and resituated in different assemblages of discourses and practices, habits and artifacts, free from intolerable hierarchy and patriarchy.

This disentanglement is a complex, long-term project of intellectual and practical world-building via experiments in philosophy, educational theory, and associative living in schools and communities; it is not merely a matter of logic and conceptual definition. Cosmopolitan philosophers and their postmodern and feminist critics have much to contribute to and learn from one another as they engage in this work.


5. Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism.”

6. Ibid., 2.


8. Ibid., 36, 62, and 295.


10. Ibid., 3.


15. Scheffler summarizes these debates up to 1999, and argues that only moderate versions of the cosmopolitan theses are plausible. Current positions of the leading authors in these debates can be found in The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism, eds. Brock and Brighouse. The details of the various positions and arguments internal to these debates lie beyond the scope of this review.

16. I intend to address pragmatist critiques and alternatives in a separate essay.


18. Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes that Nussbaum’s alleged universalism draws exclusively on Western philosophical sources and neglects non-Western cosmopolitan traditions. See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Emancipatory Cosmopolitanism: Towards an Agenda,” Development and Change 37, no. 6 (2006): 1245–1255. Thanh-Dam Truong further argues that any cosmopolitan project for universal justice that hopes to gain broad acceptance must go beyond Western sources to embrace transcultural interparadigmatic dialogue. See Thanh-Dam Truong, “One Humanity, Many Consciousnesses: Unresolved Issues in Nussbaum’s New Frontiers of Justice,” Development and Change 37, no. 6 (2006): 1259–1272. Along similar lines, Adam Webb urges an alternative liberal education model that goes beyond Nussbaum’s modest multiculturalism to root itself equally in the classics of all of the great world civilizations, with the aim of reclaiming the values that Western modernity has assaulted. See Adam Webb, “Cosmopolitan Character and the Classics of World Social Thought: Reclaiming the Widest Horizons” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2004).


23. Ibid., xiv.

24. Ibid., xv.


35. Ibid., 179.

36. Ibid.