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Cosmopolitan Distances: From the Self to the Other

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Introduction

Cosmopolitanism concerns distances in multiple and diverse ways. In the most literal sense, cosmopolitanism is typically understood by many thinkers as the annihilation of distance or the compression of space and time that brings closer different people and cultures. However, this effaces the distance that ought to separate cosmopolitanism from globalization¹ as an empirical phenomenon (in some respects in process and in other respects accomplished) of rootlessness, unobstructed contact and global mobility. In a more figurative sense, cosmopolitanism evokes the covering of the distance that separates the moral self from the ever broadening concentric circles that surround the “I”. Some theorists cross the distance between the literal sense of cosmopolitanism (being mobile, covering long distances, learning about

¹ I argue out this point in Marianna Papastephanou, *Thinking Differently About Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Eccentricity and the Globalized World* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012).

otherness) and the figurative sense (transcending the moral borders that block people's rapprochement regardless of actual encounter and contact among them). Thus, they assume an easy passage from cosmopolitan exposure (or enjoyment of diversity and eagerness to know about the world) to showing respect, even concern, for strangers. The cosmopolitan self is expected to treat the others even of the outer circles up to the whole humanity as s/he would treat the near and dear.

Many debates, especially in liberal and communitarian circles, have revolved around the extent to which the distance between the self and strangers is negotiable or manageable. But most approaches converge on the unchallenged centrality they bestow upon the self. Even the geometrical trope of concentric circles attests to the placement of the self centre-stage. To this centrality of subjectivity, I argue, another geometrical metaphor might be an appropriate response: cosmopolitanism can be illustrated through the image of eccentric circles. The decentration of the subject through ec-centricity neither effaces the self nor discards the concentric circles. It aims rather to enrich the cosmopolitan perspective with ever shifting circles where the centre is often the other, the other who invites us not quite to shrink our distance from her but rather to create a distance from what appears to be our own, what pertains to our self, what comprises, for instance, our consolidated practices, perceptions, interpretations and actions that affect otherness.

Here I will not say more about ec-centric cosmopolitanism generally.² I will rather try to instantiate it with an example of what I see as a necessary de-centration of the self. I suggest that, at the level of self-understanding and self-description, there should be a distance between the self and the attribute 'cosmopolitan'. Thus, *contra* Jeremy

² For more, see Papastephanou, *Thinking Differently About Cosmopolitanism*.

Waldron's views in his relevant article³ that a cultural-political task of today is to describe and embody the cosmopolitan rather than cosmopolitanism, my aim⁴ here is to question the facile attribution of cosmopolitanism to selfhood. To this end, I discuss the self-bestowed liberal claim 'I am a cosmopolitan'. I argue that the declarative element in this self-description obscures the possibility of extracting important ethico-political insights from the distance that might separate the self from cosmopolitanism as a supposedly accomplished ideal of selfhood. To illustrate my objections and also to point to another theoretical framing of the desirable distance between the self and the attribute 'cosmopolitan' I shall employ a dictum by Democritus.

A Critique of the 'Cosmopolitan'

Recent criticisms directed at the self-understanding of the 'cosmopolitan' have been formulated by David Hansen. Hansen refers to the problematic self-referential element of cosmopolitan discourse as follows. 'There is something amiss, awkward, and untrue to experience for a person to claim, "I am a cosmopolitan", or to say about his or her community, "We are cosmopolitan"'.⁵ The declarative modality invokes a supposed actuality of cosmopolitan identity, since the latter is proclaimed an accomplished task. But, as Hansen explains, 'a cosmopolitan sensibility is not a possession, badge, or settled accomplishment. It is an orientation that depends

³ Jeremy Waldron, "What Is Cosmopolitan?" *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 8 (2) (2000): 227-243.

⁴ This aim reflects a theoretical endeavour that comprises other texts too. See, for instance, Marianna Papastephanou, "The 'Cosmopolitan' Self Does her Homework," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45 (4) (2011): 597-612.

⁵ David Hansen, "Education Viewed Through a Cosmopolitan Prism" *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2008): 206-214, 213.

fundamentally upon the ongoing quality of one's interactions with others, with the world, and with one's own self".⁶

In my view, we may avoid the objection that Hansen has raised by shifting our perspective from the contemporary emphasis on the self-declarative element in cosmopolitan subjectivity to a third-person depiction of the cosmopolitan self through the qualifications of wisdom and goodness. As it becomes clear later on, I draw a relevant formulation from a source that is more ancient than the Diogenic declaration of his being a 'citizen of the world': I see in one of Democritus's *dicta* a way out of the centripetal implications that accompany the uses to which the Diogenic declaration has been put.

Against some abstract, disembodied accounts of cosmopolitanism, some theorists concretize the cosmopolitan self as the embodied world traveler. More than just cultural dispositions, the 'cosmopolitan characteristics of flexibility, adaptability and openness to difference and risk' are 'embodied performances of fitness and fitting in. Travellers literally embody cosmopolitanism'.⁷ However, especially within this more practice- and context- oriented approach the initial and minimal core assumption of the footloose burgher as the self-declared cosmopolitan remains stronger than ever. Thus, the basic assumption underlying such ideas is that 'cosmopolitanism, at the very least, is a way of relating to the world'.⁸ But, who relates cosmopolitically to the world and how? The typical answer reflects, in my view, a Cartesian solipsist starting point: the self who takes himself to be a citizen of the world. Consider the following citation, for instance: 'from the Greek stoics, through the Medieval Christians with

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Germann-Molz, "Cosmopolitan Bodies: Fit to Travel and Travelling to Fit" *Body and Society* 12 (3), (2006): 1-21, 17.

⁸ E. Mendieta, "From Imperial to Dialogical Cosmopolitanism" *Ethics and Global Politics* 2 (3) (2009): 241-258, 242.

their universalistic Gospel, through the Byzantine Empire, to the Enlightenment *philosophes*, to be cosmopolitan was to *think oneself citizen of the entire world*.⁹ The thinking subject considers herself a citizen of *cosmos* with no concern about any possible distance of the actual self from such an ideality. In simpler words, the self attributes to herself a cosmopolitan citizenship exclusively on grounds of how she thinks about her own self, without fathoming this symbolic citizenship in terms of how others receive the self-image that she maintains or are affected by the actions and performances of the self-declared ‘cosmopolitan’ I. Within such frameworks, most accounts of the cosmopolitan take it to portray ‘the lifestyle of a *globally conscious* person, a cultivated citizen of the world’.¹⁰

The description of oneself as cosmopolitan becomes more explicit when contemporary theorists join debates. Most interesting are cases where thinkers take offense by criticisms that surface in such debates and respond to charges. Such cases reveal identifications most tellingly. Waldron’s taking offence at Roger Scruton’s calling cosmopolitans ‘parasites’ is a case in point, one that I have discussed extensively elsewhere.¹¹ Suffice it here to say that Waldron writes that he feels the ‘sting in the tail’ as a cosmopolitan himself when Scruton characterizes the cosmopolitan ‘a parasite’. Waldron’s venture to offer a self-description of the cosmopolitan is then pictured precisely as a defence of the cosmopolitan against the charge of parasitism. To similar charges of parasitism, A. K. Appiah also responds through identification with the group that is thus targeted: ‘*We cosmopolitans* face a familiar litany of objections. Some, for example, have complained that *our*

⁹ Ibid, my emphasis.

¹⁰ Torill Strand, “The Making of a New Cosmopolitanism”, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010): 229-242, 231.

¹¹ Papastephanou, *Thinking Differently About Cosmopolitanism*.

cosmopolitanism must be parasitic'.¹² Despite merits of both approaches, namely, Waldron's and Appiah's (which are very diverse, nevertheless, regardless of their being placed together here), within them, an easy passage from the pleasure-seeking subject to the moral subject who shows respect for diversity is coupled with a view of cosmopolitans as a quasi-community. This community is determined by a 'we', i.e. by an accomplished collective subjectivity that declares its presence, contests and demarcates its own discursive space and defends itself against charges by other camps.

Thus viewed, cosmopolitan selfhood is no longer an un-finished task, an open question, an ideal that is ever receding yet always desirable and inviting of approximation. It is rather an accomplished reality, an effected and realized subjective utopia. Then again, one may point out that, although presupposing the cosmopolitans' epistemic universalism, Appiah nevertheless qualifies it with openness and inconclusiveness. Against 'counter-cosmopolitans' (in Appiah's terms, those fundamentalist universalists who believe that their truth should be universally endorsed or even enforced), Appiah retorts: '*we cosmopolitans* believe in universal truth, too, though we are less certain that we have it all already'.¹³ Further, once again affirming the first person plural of the cosmopolitan collectivity and its self-understanding, Appiah writes that '*we cosmopolitans* think we might learn something even from those we disagree with'.¹⁴ Such formulations surely mitigate the impression of completeness of the self-bestowed attribute 'cosmopolitan'; however, they still depict a self prepared to benefit cognitively from otherness (what about re-

¹² K. A. Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots", *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (3) (1997): 617-639, 618, *emph mine*.

¹³ K. A. Appiah, 'Education for Global Citizenship' In D. Coulter and J. Wiens, (eds.), *Why Do We Educate? Renewing the Conversation* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008): 83-99, 95, *emph mine*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 97, *emph mine*.

directing her/his ethico-political priorities, e.g. historical pending debts?) and, at the same time, a self who is ready to parade this qualification as yet another badge, an accomplishment that differentiates the cosmopolitans from all others and bestows upon them a sense of moral and epistemic superiority.

The time-honoured phenomenology of a 'subject-object' cosmopolitanism obfuscates a point that E. Mendieta makes (in a different context and for different reasons) as follows: 'we are always more and less than what we are imagined to be, which is why we must allow others to challenge our 'images' and 'imagination' of them, and conversely, to allow ourselves to correct our own self-understanding in light of those challenges'.¹⁵ However, although much contemporary cosmopolitanism embraces, in theory, the above statement, it pays only lip service to it, in reality. For it lets its commitment to such openness be toned down by the 'subject-object' conceptual premises that ground what counts as cosmopolitan.

What about a more dialogical model of approaching cosmopolitan self-declaration? Does it overcome the problems of the subject-object model of the self relating to the world? I think not (or not always) and I examine this possibility by reference to Bruce Ackerman. Ackerman discusses cosmopolitanism as universalist agreement on certain values, and rightly perceives its dangers. But, in a confessional tone, he declares himself a cosmopolitan as follows: 'I remain an unrepentant cosmopolitan. But there are risks lurking in this existential stance – a clear and present danger of pretentiousness, preciosity, and solipsism, as I find that others refuse to engage on the terms that ego finds so reasonable'.¹⁶ How do I, the rootless self, whose identity is cosmopolitan, cope with the radical difference of the rooted others, those who do not

¹⁵ E. Mendieta, "From Imperial to Dialogical Cosmopolitanism", 254.

¹⁶ B. Ackerman, 'Rooted Cosmopolitanism', *Ethics*, 104 (3) (1994): 516–535, 535.

share what I find so reasonable? How do I cope with those others (counter-cosmopolitans, if we recall Appiah's term) who enter dialogue with the view that they already possess the universal truth whereas I (as Appiah has also asserted) am open enough to assume that I may not possess it and, therefore, I may learn it from others (though surely not from troublesome others whom I only need to learn how to handle or how to cope with)? Once again we have here a rationale of self-declared cosmopolitanism where the self is put centre stage in the privileged moral position of being the one who has to cope with others' absolutizing solipsistically their own standpoint or the one who fears the cosmopolitan failures of others.

Before Diogenes

Already in antiquity (and before Diogenes's famous statement 'I am a citizen of the world'), Socrates had declared his belonging to the world rather than exclusively to the city. With an eye to the Socratic ideal of an examined life, Martha Nussbaum has connected education for citizenship with three capacities, the third of which is to see oneself as a cosmopolitan.¹⁷ Seeing oneself as a cosmopolitan is crucial for Nussbaum as her employment of the Diogenic declaration (I am a kosmou politis) as a motto in her acclaimed essay on patriotism and cosmopolitanism attests.¹⁸ However, unlike some theorists who associate the cosmopolitan with a rather undemanding self-image (politically and ethically), at least Nussbaum does not give to the idea of 'seeing

¹⁷ M. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 9-11.

¹⁸ M. Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', in *For Love of Country?* eds. M. Nussbaum and J. Cohen, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 2. It has to be said that, as her 2002 introduction to the corresponding edition of *For Love of Country* shows, Nussbaum is well aware of the risks involved in any complacent 'we' (perhaps more aware than many of her critics), be it the 'we' of compatriots threatened and alarmed by new realities or, by extension, that of more globally sensitive versions of any particular collectivity up to the most encompassing collectivity itself.

oneself as cosmopolitan' a primarily travelling and cultural-touristic sense. Drawing on Stoic themes, she emphasizes, rather, the moral obligations that should go hand in hand with the cosmopolitan self-image. Thus, despite the fact that Nussbaum's emphasis on the capacity to see oneself as cosmopolitan maintains some of the problems of the declarative self-description, it has to be acknowledged that her cosmopolitanism makes some demands upon the self. Likewise, it would be unfair to take Diogenes's declaration of himself as a citizen of the world out of its context and of its performative operations. Be that as it may, there is indeed something self-congratulatory in inviting people to be 'cosmopolitans as we are'. Thus, the question is: can we approach the adjective 'cosmopolitan' in a more de-centred or ec-centric way, can we salvage it from the self-indulgent tone or from the 'subject-object' relation?

The answer I give presupposes a critique of the monological framework in which cosmopolitanism is couched. Monologism posits the individual in the centre of relations. The self draws the ever expanding circles closer to her and thus remains the main reference point of cosmopolitanism.¹⁹ Instead of worrying about how we, as incarnations of the ideal cosmopolitan self-description, will cope with 'counter-cosmopolitans'; instead of worrying about how to cover the supposed distance that separates us from them or from other 'others'; it is perhaps more advisable to turn to the distance that separates any embodied cosmopolitanism from the ever receding cosmopolitan ideal. Facing instead of effacing or ignoring such a distance leads us to

¹⁹ Zelia Gregoriou raises similar objections to such operations of concentric cosmopolitanism, though from a different standpoint. Z. Gregoriou, 'Resisting the Pedagogical Domestication of Cosmopolitanism: From Nussbaum's Concentric Circles of Humanity to Derrida's *Aporetic Ethics of Hospitality*' *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2003): 257-266.

test our cosmopolitanism on grounds of how we act in ways that affect, view or treat otherness (human and non-human).

Hence, let us look for something more minimal (but, simultaneously, ethico-politically maximal) about the human self than contemporary self-declarative approaches to being cosmopolitan. Diogenes's declaration, interpreted by Nussbaum as an invitation to people to see themselves as citizens of the world rather than of the *polis*, can also be construed as a plea to join him in a citizenship out of his world; in other words, to join him in recognizing that the cosmopolitan citizen is a utopian citizen, a citizen of a world to come, a world that should come, or, better, a world that should be brought to existence by those who would aspire to be its citizens, yet they are not. As indicated just above, we need something ec-centric that, instead of placing us *in* the world (as it currently is), displaces us and commit us to images that are *out of this* world; something relatively disconnected from the first person (singular or plural: 'I', 'we', 'myself', 'ourselves') and, at the same time, more outspoken about the kinds of thought and action that can guide people as preconditions of cosmopolitanism. However, Diogenes's self-proclamation is inextricable from the performative purposes of the time of its enunciation, and it is a self-proclamation after all.

Going even further back in time we find a third-person ideal description of the cosmopolitan that was given by a philosopher older than the Cynic Diogenes.

Democritus (b. 460 BC) had stated roughly 50 years before Diogenes that 'any land is traversible by the *wise*; to the *good* self the whole world is homeland' (frg 247,

emphasis mine).²⁰ Traversing space and covering distances is a possibility assumed in this dictum as much as in current accounts of cosmopolitanism; what makes the difference from those, however, is the distance from the self that the third person introduces and also that traversibility is qualified by intellectual and ethical preconditions: wisdom and goodness respectively.

Conclusion

The distance between the real and the ideal (that I am not, but I would like to be) as well as between the I (we) and the Other that the third-person description of the wise and the good inserts staves off the risk of cosmopolitanism as self-proclamation. Therefore, it illustrates the de-centering process of an ec-centric cosmopolitanism as a diversion from the self-centeredness of the contemporary globalized self and from the self-indulgent, soothing self-image of the self-declared cosmopolitan. It also keeps away associations of accomplishment because it sets demands on selfhood such as wisdom and goodness which, thankfully, the Western, 'cosmopolitanized' world still regards as daunting (or, at least, shies away from claiming that it meets them already). Although citizens of the globalized world often raise claims to cosmopolitan selfhood, seldom do they feel comfortable with claims of having achieved the status of the wise and the good. They would not declare 'we, the wise and good' with the same ease that they declare 'we, cosmopolitans'.

Wisdom and goodness and the awe they inspire supply the missing link with action.

For, the passage to action is really absent in the received view on cosmopolitanism:

²⁰ [In the Greek original: andri sophō pasa gē vati; Psychēs gar agathēs patris o xymbas cosmos]. The phrase is also mentioned by R. Schlaifer, (1936). "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 47 (1936): 165-204, 169.

the emphasis on never-ending, formative dialogue does not specify what the self-declared 'cosmopolitans' deem wise and ethical to do in a world that celebrates, yet, arguably, pays lip service to, diversity. The 'cosmopolitanized' world indulges itself in the positive moral self-image that the proclamation of cosmopolitan commitment bestows upon the person. However, at the same time, the supposedly cosmopolitan citizens accept with too few questions the unethical role of their governments in various conflicts, the ongoing destruction of the environment and the failure to take the appropriate measures, as well as the letting of people die of hunger, lack of water and medication in many places around the world. Against this situation, wisdom and goodness raise expectations of thought and action that unsettle the convenient conception of the cosmopolitan as the person who, rooted or rootless, enriches herself with cultural material from diverse localities and shows the appropriate respect to such diverse providers of existential options and of marketplaces of goods, ideas and lifestyles.

Likewise, the elitism that is usually associated with the graduate, the academic, the traveler as such (or the footloose manager) can be challenged by the fact that neither wisdom nor goodness is inextricably tied with the Eurocentric notion of the educated and well-fed burgher. Apparently paradoxically, the cognitive and affective significance of learning about the other can often be grasped and then expressed by people who have developed a self-less and inquisitive personality regardless of ability or inability to 'prove' their cosmopolitanism by means of degrees, journeys and other such tokens of mobility and encyclopedic knowledgeability. Furthermore, the inconclusive character of the ideals of wisdom and goodness can be transferred to the ideal of being cosmopolitan and make the latter's inconclusiveness stand out too.