



Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers

Kwame Anthony Appiah

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Drawing on a broad range of disciplines, including history, literature, and philosophy—as well as the author's own experience of life on three continents—*Cosmopolitanism* is a moral manifesto for a planet we share with more than six billion strangers.

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers Details

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From Reader Review Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers for online ebook

Theresa says

I don't have much to say about this book. I have been aware of it for several years, have seen it referenced in various places and decided I should actually read the thing. Turned out to be a bit of a disappointment. It felt like a book that just glanced around on the surface of the author's "we are one world under it all" philosophy. Every once in a while it would start down an interesting path, but cut it off quickly with a homily. It's not that I necessarily disagree with the book's message, though I do take issue with some of his positions, e.g. I think he misses the point re cultural property rights and why they are important. Just don't feel that I learned anything new nor was I led to any new ways of looking at or thinking about anything.

Caleb says

As a student of philosophy, and as a person genuinely interested in the type of project that Appiah pursues herein, I became increasingly frustrated with his work here. In an attempt to avoid metaphysical claims--and the subsequent alienation such notions entail--but, in the process, fails to come up with a coherent theory for dealing with these issues. His examples and storytelling feel frequently like counterexamples as much as examples to make his points.

I was very interested in Appiah's project and feel like I was putting forth a sympathetic ear in reading his work. In addition, contemporary ethical projects necessitate the sort of global thinking and trans-cultural realities he brings into the conversation. We need to think in a more thorough and grounded way than ethical theory, generally speaking, has managed to do. I am not denying that many ethicists are interested in engaging these ideas, but the flexibility that Appiah orchestrates is genuinely intriguing. Unfortunately, by dancing around universal and metaphysical claims the way he does, Appiah suggests solid ground that he subsequently ignores in his writing. That is, I argue Appiah does make metaphysical claims he ignores in order to make his project sound more successful than it is.

The idea of cosmopolitanism--in some form or another--is one route to articulating a trans-boundary ethic in a global age. And, indeed, I find Appiah's project of great importance. What I left the book feeling, though, is that someone needs to make more solid claims than he does and to articulate, and in fact argue, a theory that Appiah avoids. In the introduction, Appiah jests that philosophers do not frequently write "really useful books." Perhaps he takes his own joke too much to heart by avoiding more meaningful claims in the rest of the text.

ralowe says

"Would you really want to live in a world in which the only thing anyone had ever cared about was saving lives?" pg 166. lol for reals? easily the most offensive thing i've read in a while. definitely no mbembe. he and gavin newsom should go jack off over policy together.

Osbert says

This book is awful. The cosmopolitan liberal moment that Appiah extols has passed. A commitment to everybody as part of a "universal humanity" is a commitment to nobody and nothing in particular. Theresa May (of all people!) got it right when she said, "If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means." Cosmopolitan liberals like Appiah don't have a clue about what holds societies together. Read David Goodhart's "The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics" instead of this utter pap.

Lizzie says

I didn't hate this as much as many of my classmates did. It was pretty interesting. Appiah isn't in the business of giving answers but into provoking thought about deep questions— what does it mean to be a citizen of the world? How does one do the most good? Saw lots of connections with All American Boys, Happiness, Go Went Gone, The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas...also The Good Place which is my new binge show.

Phillip Rhoades says

My interest in Professor Appiah's work began a week ago when he presented at SUU on the topic of "Moral Disagreement", one of the chapters in this book. I was pleased to witness a writing style as engaging as his oration. Kwame Appiah explains a complicated philosophy with both wit and wisdom; he uses modern examples to highlight the central tenets of ageless cosmopolitanism. While the book succeeds at detailing a philosophy that deals with the challenges of a "global", modern life (though as we learn, history shows a perpetual influence of "globalism" throughout the centuries) it ultimately fails to lead the reader to practical conclusions for herself. While no philosophy can have a catch all solution for the world's myriad problems I do believe I would have been more satisfied with a text that concluded with something more refined than the author's closing chapter. Despite this weakness, I believe Prof. Appiah's ideas ultimately compel the reader to engage both our worldly citizens and are neighbors in a new manner. We need to move beyond tolerance to a shared understanding. (I obviously need to edit my reviews better).

Richard says

Kwame Anthony Appiah was interviewed on the Ezra Klein Show (podcast) in May 2017. Among the topics discussed was his modern take on the philosophy of Cosmopolitanism.

Note to self: see Jeffers, Chike. "Appiah's Cosmopolitanism." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51.4 (2013): 488-510, already in possession (DOI 10.1111/sjp.12040).

Sean Sullivan says

I have to say I find Appiah's cosmopolitanism to be incredibly appealing. Call me a globalized liberal who thinks we can work most things out, but the fact that besides a bedrock belief in toleration of all but intolerance, there is little else that exists as a absolute in Appiah's thinking is attractive to me.

I am sick of all encompassing theories. But I am also wary of an all out relativism. Appiah seems to be trying to walk a line somewhere in the middle. He argues that through engagement, "contamination" and tolerance we can create a new ethics what exactly this means in practical application isn't always clear, and this small book doesn't answer all the questions I have, but it's a start.

Babette says

Appiah writes elegantly about cosmopolitanism, lacing his narrative (employing "we" as in, "we cosmopolitans") with anecdotes, effectively referencing philosophers, authors, and the like. The book is insidious, however...too easy in its conclusions. It celebrates the "contamination" of cosmopolitanism's curiously and engagement with difference without critiquing seriously enough the uneven distributions of power that produce and map those differences. Moreover, there is little if any acknowledgement of what critics like Tim Brennan argue vehemently...that cosmopolitanism, like globalization and neoliberalism, are universals with origins in the West--their dissemination serves the interest of not all, but some. This is not to say, however, that the search for universals, or for ideals is a useless pursuit, only that the motivations, rationalizations and deployment of universals must be examined carefully.

Bryn Hammond says

3.5. With reservations.

I chased up a book by him on the strength of this more topical talk:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081lkkj>

also written up in the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/201...>

It's one of the book's arguments from another angle: to make an idol of Western Civ is to ignore the interpenetration of cultures.

L.A. says

What are our ethical obligations to strangers? Appiah's answer, packaged int his relatively short, readable book, is the philosophy of cosmopolitanism. If the word conjures up images of chic city dwellers or the frou-frou drinks they possibly consume, rest assured: Appiah's using cosmopolitanism in the sense of the original root word: cosmos. So, if we're all citizens of the cosmos -- or, to scale it back, the planet -- how should we interact with and treat each other?

Appiah covers a lot of different territory here. There's a takedown of logical positivism, a bit of quibbling with Peter Singer, and a long, thoughtful chapter on the complexities of returning stolen art/artifacts to their

original cultures (I don't entirely agree with him, but he does bring up some points I hadn't considered). The way we react to other cultures customs is explored at length, and it's all punctuated with stories and examples from Appiah's native Ghana. Philosophy from a non-Western POV is definitely an eye-opener, and I would definitely recommend this book to others interested in philosophy and ethics. I'm not a convert to cosmopolitanism as a philosophy -- it's a bit too laissez-faire for my tastes and dismissive of cultural appropriation to boot -- but it's definitely given me some things to think about. And that, ultimately, is what a good book does.

Peter van de Pas says

This is a very disappointing book on Cosmopolitanism. For someone who wants the people of the world to enter into conversation with one another Appiah is surprisingly dismissive of others. We are presented with caricatures of anti-globalists, postmodern relativists and people who want to preserve some kind of cultural authenticity, their arguments being presented in an overly simplistic fashion so that Appiah can easily wave them away.

But even in these situations he is hardly convincing. To the ubiquitousness of Coca Cola he counters that at least it is drunk at different moments throughout the world. Really? The practical impossibility of acquiring a traditional ceremonial gown in Ghana by the Ghanese themselves because they are so popular throughout the world is countered with the argument that at least the producers are making good money. This is not entering into the discussion at all.

What strikes me even more in this book is the complete absence of the role of power and money in a globalised world. He explains the feelings of the fundamentalist forces in the Islam world like this:

"[...]Islam, which once led Christendom, has somehow fallen behind, a sense that produces an uncomfortable mélange of resentment, anger, envy and admiration." No word on oil, Israel or two Gulf wars.

The, sometimes a little condescending, chatty tone of this book only enhances the impression that this is a vaguely argued, intellectually lazy introduction to the subject. There must be better books on Cosmopolitanism.

Julie Bozza says

I've long liked to think of myself as a citizen of the world, as a cosmopolitan - so I was tad disappointed when bits of this book stuck in my craw. However, I agreed with almost all of it, and some of it was a relief to read - to see some things that had been niggling at me, now set out in black and white, with 'permission' to feel that's OK. Maybe it was more the examples than the messages that bothered me? Anyway! I would need to read it again (and not so fragmentedly) and ponder it well, in order to analyse it further, and right now I don't have time.

In the meantime, this gets my philosophical seal of approval.

Worthless Bum says

Thoroughly, disappointingly mediocre. A couple of the arguments in this book were pretty terrible, the rest being rather tepid. Appiah disagrees with Peter Singer et al about the conclusions drawn from the Shallow Pond thought experiment, in which we are said to have very demanding ethical obligations to donate as

much of our worldly possessions as possible to help the poor in the third world. His objection to this argument? We can't know all of the consequences of our actions, so we can't say that the sort of austere altruism drawn out from the Shallow Pond is the ethical thing to do. Really Kwame? Then how is it that this purported fog of epistemic uncertainty leaves any room for casuistry or ethics at all - for if ignorance of the full extent of the consequences of our actions is good enough reason to obviate an ethical duty, then NO action can be judged ethical because the full consequences of every single action can not be teased out. Appiah could have made something similar to R.M. Hare's suggestion of adopting general rules of thumb for ethical behavior, since neither can we know the full consequences of our actions nor do we have the time to examine the consequences of every trivial decision we make in a robust way. Then there is Bernard Williams who contends that utilitarianism demands too much of us, and that we should devote time and money to personal projects that we find meaningful. But I digress.

The other ridiculous argument that comes to mind is where Appiah criticizes the view that logical positivism takes on ethics. Following the tradition of Hume, logical positivists hold to the categorical distinction between is and ought. Facts describe actual states of affairs, they "are". Ethical claims say how states of affairs OUGHT to be. So it would seem that one could not settle ethical questions with merely an appeal to the facts, or vice-versa. Appiah's response to this is a radical interpretation of underdetermination. He claims that all scientific descriptions of reality are underdetermined, that some alternate theory could hold equally well or better with the given facts. Ergo, the uncertainty surrounding ethical questions is matched by uncertainty surrounding matters of fact. How this is supposed to help Appiah's case I can't be sure.

The one thing in this book that Appiah does well is explaining the difficulty in convincing people of something when their view of the world is radically different. It would be quite challenging, for instance, to convince a remote tribe that disease is caused by pathogens when it is central to their world view that diseases are curses from angry spirits. Much preliminary education and paradigm shifting would have to take place before the tribespeople would find the germ theory of disease plausible.

The rest of the book is largely a tepid plea for having interculturally shared values and mutual respect for diversity and differences of opinion.

Louise says

Everyone everywhere who lives in a complex world should read this book. It takes a difficult topic: How do we live in a world that's diverse and contradictory – and engages a thoughtful and gentle conversation and consideration about this subject

This book is intensely well-written. Appiah's concepts and arguments are exemplified and explained anecdotally through his own personal experience. He generously uses these diverse cultural experiences as models, thus cutting down the abstraction of philosophical thought, and allowing a means to engage with complex ideas.

The book is fairly fast read, pleasurable, and very accessible. It seems highly influential having already been translated into about 6 languages and is in the works to be translated into about half a dozen more.

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is that this book gave me tools I cherish for working from a more considered understanding of how diversity and globalization will play out in the everyday of my life.

