

# **COSMOPOLITANISM:** **ETHICS IN A WORLD OF STRANGERS**

**A Review of a magnum opus by  
Kwame Anthony Appiah**

*Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* is a timely masterpiece by a contemporary philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah. He states his goal in writing the book in the Introduction:

Only in the past couple of hundred years has every human community been drawn into a single web of trade and a global network of information. Each of us can realistically imagine contacting any other of our fellow humans and sending them something worth having; a radio, an antibiotic, a good idea. Unfortunately, we could also send something that would do harm; a virus, a pollutant, a bad idea. Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is to affirm the very idea of morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed over the millennia of living in local tribes and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become.<sup>1</sup>

He defines cosmopolitanism as being composed of two ideas: “One is the idea we have obligations to others...the other is that we take seriously the value of not just human life but particular human lives, which also means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.”<sup>2</sup> Cosmopolitanism is feeling a responsibility to all humankind, valuing life even if it is the life of a stranger and having the curiosity to want to know about the specifics of that person’s culture. In short cosmopolitanism is universal concern and respect for other people.

The recent public expression of interest in cosmopolitanism is just the latest expression in the history of the concept. It has a long and distinguished history as a search for an ideal beyond the nation or the city. There have

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<sup>1</sup> Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*,(2006), WW Norton: NY, pp.xii-xiii

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. xv

been periods of cosmopolitan thought, interrupted by long periods when the word and concept were forgotten.

“Cosmos” means world and “polites” means citizen. So cosmopolitan literally means world citizen. It means belonging to the cosmos not to just one specific place. And it means feeling at home every where. The Cynic philosophers of ancient Greece coined the word because they questioned the traditional belief that you had to belong to a fixed community, the polis. To them a citizen of the cosmos was the opposite of a citizen of the polis.

Subsequent scholars and leaders embraced the concept. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius spoke of the “oneness of humanity”, enlightenment thinkers embraced cosmopolitanism, the French wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man in a cosmopolitan spirit, and Kant’s ideal of perpetual peace reflects cosmopolitanism. Kant believed grass roots people would eventually become so cosmopolitan they would demand peace which would not come from a monarch top down.

The book Cosmopolitanism is a manifesto (a public declaration of a moral or political nature) in which Appiah urges the reader to re-evaluate his/her worldview. He asserts adopting cosmopolitanism as a worldview is far more ennobling, universal, and integrative than other worldviews and identities. He also urges readers to use the concept of cosmopolitanism as a tool to understand modern society. It works as a tool if you analyze processes and realities from the perspective of cosmopolitanism. He asks whether cultural artifacts can be owned by individuals and wants to know what we owe strangers by virtue of our shared humanity. He concludes that we do have obligations to all other humans based on our spontaneous curiosity about them.

Appiah also asserts “all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabularies to begin a conversation”.<sup>3</sup> This was a fact every time people encountered each other for the first time. Cosmopolitan curiosity and cosmopolitan engagement were evident as people began cross-cultural conversations. Habits of cosmopolitan co-existence and negotiating were always evident.

Along with cosmopolitanism, Appiah broaches the subject of universal morality. While some people deny that there is a universally binding

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xxi

morality, others say such traits as kindness, compassion, generosity, and taking responsibility toward children are universal while stinginess, cruelty, and inconsiderateness are universally negative.<sup>4</sup>

Cosmopolitanism then incorporates many cross-cultural practices which extend way beyond the original European context of Greek thought. Some of these practices are:

1. hospitality, a generous hospitality, creating an ambiance of eager conversation and conviviality, where social standing, age, and race all disappear because enjoying the occasion and the people becomes everyone's highest priority;
2. a readiness to engage with the world and other people;
3. advocating for human rights, equality of all people and all races, and respect for international law;
4. protection of cultural property of value to all humans, not just the artist or the nation the artist was born in, and facilitating people's seeing each other's art. Nok sculptures, Elgin marbles, Norse goblets can be seen as contributions to "the civilization of the universal." The art, in most cases, was communally, not individually, inspired in the first place.

When it comes to people's identities, some people think if you identify yourself as a cosmopolitan then you do not identify with nationalists or localists. Appiah goes out of his way in many of the chapters of the book to assert we can feel connection and belonging at all levels.<sup>5</sup>

A quote by Buddha summarizes some of the thoughts in this book. "In the sky there is no distinction between east and west, people create distinctions in their own minds and then believe them to be true."

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, xxi

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.