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A Call to Cosmopolitanism: Solving the Political Problem of Caring for One's Own

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## Abstract

This paper explores human being's reluctance to extend our care and sympathy to those we deem "other". Humans tend to assign a high value to family, friends, and fellow citizens, while often ignoring the plight of those who lie beyond our communities. This sentiment is present in the most canonical Western texts, in our own daily social interactions, and our various world nations' internal and foreign policies. Using rhetorical, philosophical and experiential evidence, this paper makes a moral argument for the necessity and the possibility of good human conduct by extending the care we feel for "our own" to the wider global community.

*Keywords:* Morality, Responsibility, Cosmopolitanism, Care of One's Own

## A Call to Cosmopolitanism: Solving the Political Problem of the Caring for One's Own

Humans have a tendency to assign disproportionately high value to their own people: family, friends, and members of a shared nationality, race or religion. Typically, we care for “our own” more than we care for others. We’ve developed highly sophisticated personal, social, political and economic means of caring for those with whom we share commonalities, perhaps because for most of human evolutionary history we lived in small societies where we tended to see the same people every day. But in an increasingly cosmopolitan world, the challenge facing us today is how to extend our care beyond those we consider “our own people”. Throughout literary history, many canonical texts have treated this issue as one fundamental to human nature, and a serious political problem. Homer, Plato and Shakespeare all seem to suggest that we attribute higher value to those we consider our own. Fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a Birmingham jail cell and wrote that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” suggesting that it is time to put aside our tendency to limit our concern to our own people and take up the fight for the liberation of every human. While great Western literature often highlights the difficulty of breaking out of a provincial mindset, the philosophy of Kwame Appiah, the experiential evidence of Dr. King’s fight for civil rights, and my own small-scale experience of bringing disparate groups together, shows that good human community is indeed possible. This paper will make an argument for the possibility of devoting ourselves to a cosmopolitan principle that will allow us to weigh fairly the needs of strangers and kin.

The tendency to limit care to one’s own people, and the utter destruction that inclination can bring, can be found in two of the most foundational texts of the Western canon: Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, much of the violence and death in these epics can be attributed to a defense of one’s own. It is telling that before the war is recounted by Nestor and Menelaus in

book three and four respectively, Nestor's first words to Telemachus are: "Strangers - friends, who are you?" (Homer, *Odyssey* 3.79). Once convinced he is speaking to the son of his dear departed friend Odysseus, Nestor is willing to extend his hospitality. Similarly, it is only after having ascertained confirmation that he is among friends that Menelaus relates the tragic events. The ten year Trojan War begins when Agamemnon leads a massive Achaean assault on Troy on behalf of his brother Menelaus, whose wife Helen ran off with a Trojan prince. The oath of Tyndareus had necessitated the protection of Menelaus' own wife. Likewise, Achilles abandons the war when Agamemnon takes Briseis – his own – from him. Achilles only returns to the conflict after the death of Patroclus, *his* beloved. A modicum of order is restored towards the end of the *Iliad*, when Achilles returns to King Priam the body of his beloved son:

Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came,  
 .....  
 But one, one was left me, to guard *my walls, my people* –  
 the one you killed the other day, *defending his fatherland,*  
*my Hector!* It's all for him I've come to the ships now,  
 to win him back from you – I bring a priceless ransom.  
 Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in *my own right,*  
 remember your *own father!* (Homer, *Iliad* 24.580-89, my emphasis).

A similar preoccupation with the protection of one's own is displayed nine years after the ten year war, when Odysseus returns to Ithaca and violently removes the suitors from his house:

You dogs! You never imagined I'd return from Troy-  
 So cocksure that you bled *my house* to death,  
 ravished *my serving women-* wooed *my wife*  
 behind *my back* while I was still alive. (Homer, *Odyssey* 22. 36-42, my emphasis).

Both Priam and Odysseus assign the highest value to their own: as community leaders of Troy and Ithaca respectively, their primary duty is the protection of the people, but ties of kinship are stronger than ties of community, thus both men act against their community's best interest to secure what is most closely theirs. With Hector (the next in line to the throne) dead, Priam risks Achilles' wrath, which could leave his war-ravaged people without a ruler, to perform his son's death rites, while Odysseus savagely murders the 108 suitors, many of them either fellow Ithacans, or the sons of his friends. Thus, Homer's classic epics demonstrate a fundamental engagement with the human tendency to assign a disproportionately high value to people (and property) which we deem our own, and the destructive lengths humans will go to ensure their stability. Not only are Menelaus and Achilles motivated by the perceived insult arising from the loss of "their" women, their fellow Achaeans are forced to embark on a ten to twenty year excursion out of allegiance to their fellow countrymen. The result is the death of four great heroes: Achilles, Patrocles, Hector and Ajax, countless Trojan and Achaean soldiers, and the destruction of a once-great city.

The preoccupation with one's own people appears elsewhere in ancient Greek texts. A third of the way into the *Republic*, a Platonic text that attempts to pin down the nature of justice, Socrates limits the size of the ideal city: "guard in every way against a city's being little or seemingly big; rather it should be sufficient and one" (Plato, 423 c). Socrates understood that a city too small cannot be self-sufficient (369 b), but one too large cannot maintain peace and effective government. The ideal city is one where, "when one of its citizens suffers anything at all, either good or bad, such a city will most of all say that the affected part is its own, and all will share the joy or the pain" (462 d). Socrates understands the difficulty of ensuring this kind of communal spirit when the group is too large. Implicit in this assertion is the belief that humans

are good at interaction on a small-scale, but care for one's own cannot be extended to a large population. Later, Socrates advocates communal living: "And all of them will be together, since they have common houses and mess, with no one privately possessing anything of the kind" (458 *d*). It is relatively easy to convince his interlocutors of the value of communal living, however, when Socrates extends this principle to family life, "All these women are to belong to all these men in common, and no woman is to live privately with any man. And the children, in their turn, will be in common, and neither will a parent know his own offspring, or a child his parent," he meets opposition: "But I suppose that there would arise a great deal of dispute as to whether [communal families] are possible or not" (457 *d*). It is precisely because Socrates' plan to share spouses and children goes so explicitly against our innate desire to care for our own that Glaucon, Adeimantus, and indeed readers, find the plan so absurd. Implicit in this discussion is the understanding that we care too much about *our* lovers, *our* offspring, and *our* homes to even consider sharing them, even if it is for the benefit of our tiny community. Indeed, through statements like: "reproduction for the commonwealth," and "he begets for the city a child," Socrates clarifies that in the ideal city childbearing is undertaken to benefit the group (561 *a*). But even in a society where every action is for the greater good, an idea Glaucon and Adeimantus readily accept as the best of all possible worlds, sharing one's own family is thought too great a sacrifice.

A similar comment on family obligations is made in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Cordelia, Edgar, Gonoril, Regan, and Edmund are variously considered "unnatural," treacherous or even monstrous precisely in so far as they do not properly care for their own. When she fails to hyperbolize her love for her father, providing instead an accurate and unadorned declaration of filial devotion, Cordelia is admonished by Lear:

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
 Propinquity, and property of blood,  
 And as a stranger to my heart and me  
 Hold thee from this for ever (Shakespeare, *King Lear* 1.1.105-8).

As the favorite daughter, Cordelia is expected to show the most heightened sense of love and devotion. Her failure to do so causes her father to misinterpret her actions for that of a stranger, and likewise he treats her as such. This sentiment is echoed in Edgar's final indictment of Edmund, who betrays his father and brother in an attempt to become Earl:

... *thou art a traitor,*  
 False to *thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,*  
 Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince,  
 And from th'extremest upward of thy head  
 To the descent and dust beneath thy feet  
 A most toad-spotted traitor. (24.127-35, my emphasis).

The tension at the heart of *King Lear* lies in our moral responsibility to care for our own. Family members and kinsmen are expected to hold their filial duties in the utmost importance, a fact that is heightened by the preoccupation with family matters, even as the country is being plunged into war. *King Lear* demonstrates the perceived naturalness of filial devotion, and the monstrosity we associate with those who abandon their family obligations.

Thus far I have attempted to show how the tendency to care for "one's own people," one's lovers, children, friends, and fellow citizens, is built into the very fabric of not only human nature- given our evolutionary history of small local communities- but of western civilization and literature. This tendency can provoke disagreements among friends (as Plato demonstrates in

the *Republic*), wars between countries (evident in Homer's account of the Trojan War), and family disputes with fatal results (as occurs in *King Lear*). However, it can also result in internal dissention within a community. The ties that bind communities together get tighter the smaller they are: family over friends, friends over strangers, members of your city over members of your country, etc. However, even members of relatively small communities can be divided by differences that dictate the exclusion of the other. History attests to the serious political problems moral insularity causes. The U.S. civil rights movement met resistance precisely because it threatened traditions, making white southerners feel as if *their way of life* was under attack. Segregationists cared so much for their own way of life that they were unable or unwilling to recognize the suffering of other people. Sitting in a Birmingham jail cell, imprisoned for his peaceful campaign of economic disruption against segregated businesses in downtown Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter responding to the public criticisms of local white clergymen. The result was one of the most impassioned calls for Americans to set aside their tendency to care for "their own people" and extend their care to all humanity.

The clergymen who criticized King professed their sympathy for the African American desire for civic freedom. Nevertheless, they gathered to publish an admonishment of the demonstrations taking part in their city, writing: "We are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and in part led by *outsiders*. We recognize the natural impatience of a people who feel that their hopes are slow in being recognized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely" (Statement by Alabama Clergymen 1963, 1, my emphasis). The authors of this letter accuse King and other leaders of being "outsiders," questioning the sincerity, efficacy, and morality of foreign community leaders. Implicit in this accusation is skepticism of a non-resident of Birmingham

valuing and caring for the lives of Birmingham residents. These religious figures seemed to ignore their Christian imperative to “Honor all men,” as exhibited in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:17, King James Bible). Yet King did not share their skepticism, and “summoned the ideals of Christian humanism to overcome national complacency about racial segregation” (Gaipa, 2007, p. 280). In response King wrote the following, a lengthy quotation, but one which must be quoted in its entirety to preserve the power of the message:

I think I should indicate why I am in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against “outsiders coming in”... I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns: and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom far beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. (Martin Luther King, *Letter*, 1-2).

King’s concern with outsider status is twofold: not only is he defending his right to protest in Birmingham because his care for humanity is greater than his care for members of his particular group or city, he is also addressing the larger issue of racial outsider status in America: “King’s strategy in this text is to reverse and displace the racial binarism that has confined blacks as outsiders in segregated American society” (Gaipa, 281). America, a country founded on the

principle of equality and freedom, was only made possible through the exclusion of certain groups from those “self-evident” principles.<sup>1</sup> We cannot return to the time of the founding fathers and change that, but we can ensure that the conflicting social history of hierarchy and denial is brought to an end. This is King’s mission: to affirm the principles his nation was built on by extending them to every citizen, regardless of socially contingent ethnic categories.

The message of the Birmingham letter goes explicitly against the care of one’s own principle. While in a certain sense King is very literally caring for his own, fighting for the civic liberation of his fellow African American people, the rhetoric of the letter does not elevate any particular group in his estimation. In speaking of the “interrelatedness of all communities,” and the “inescapable network of mutuality,” King expresses the moral imperative of the complete unity of the United States, calling on readers to replace ties of origin and race with ties of humanity. No longer can we sit idly by and watch others suffer, thinking we should stay out of “their fight”; any struggle for particular justice is a fight for the very idea of Justice. For Dr. King, good human conduct and community relies on our willingness to see beyond socially contingent categories of affinity and bind ourselves together in the larger spirit of mankind.

The phenomenon I have been articulating throughout this paper, caring only for those with whom you share commonalities, is facilitated by human experience demonstrating that most people think in these categories. It is hard to challenge such an ingrained way of seeing human interaction. Of course Menelaus would be hurt over losing *his* wife; of course Edmund, Regan and Gonoril owed something to *their* fathers; of course we are reticent to take Plato’s advice and

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<sup>1</sup> The preamble to the Declaration of Independence states: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Declaration of Independence of The United States of America* by Thomas Jefferson, p.2).

share *our* lovers and children in commune; to us, any deviation from these practices appears wholly unnatural and monstrous. Fostering a cosmopolitan attitude that allows us to weigh other's needs fairly does not necessitate the abandonment all personal ties for an abstract principle. However, we must recognize the danger implicit in ascribing value based on genetic, religious, political, or national proximity. This requires the shattering of what Dr. King referred to as "the paralyzing chains of conformity" (10). Perhaps King's message is what Socrates was suggesting in turning the city into a family? The ideal-city allegory does not necessitate our abandonment of filial ties to the larger community; rather, those attachments ought to be tempered by an awareness of the humanity of others. This position of "partial cosmopolitanism" is the foundation of contemporary-philosopher Kwame Appiah's moral thought.

Appiah's book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, takes up the very concerns of this paper: how to achieve an enlightened world where humans move beyond their provincial ties.<sup>2</sup> Appiah begins his book by acknowledging an astounding phenomenon: in walking down New York's fifth avenue one comes into contact with more people than our hunter-gatherer ancestors saw in a lifetime (xii). This profound shift in our social interactions necessitates a profound moral shift as well: no longer can we continue to limit our concern to our immediate surroundings, we are inextricably connected to the network of humanity:

The worldwide web of information- radio, television, telephones, the Internet- means not only that we can affect lives everywhere but that we can learn about life anywhere, too. Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and

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<sup>2</sup> Appiah qualifies his work by stating that he is a philosopher, and as such, did not create a book of policy (that is a blueprint for how to achieve cosmopolitan societies). Rather, he hopes his book will make it harder for readers to think in abstract categories of "us," and "them" (xxi).

equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become. (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xiii).

In his declaration of the new moral imperative, Appiah echoes Dr. King. However, compared to Appiah's global mandate, King's call for a unified America is almost provincial in comparison. Fifty years ago we were connected by radio, telephones and televisions; that media allowed the civil rights movement to flourish. Americans who had never been to the Jim Crow South could now confirm its antidemocratic horrors with their own senses; furthermore, in jockeying for moral and political superiority in the Cold War, America could no longer afford to have the world watch them turn the hoses and dogs on their ostensibly free and equal citizens.<sup>3</sup> The civil rights movement harnessed the power of the media to capture the conscience of millions of Americans. However, with the ascension of the Internet, Appiah is able to extend King's humanistic appeal to a global level. Thus, he ties information to obligation: to know of another is to share in the responsibility of their reality. In order to do this, Appiah argues, we must strive to cultivate a cosmopolitan attitude:

There are two strands that intertwine the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties shared by citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular human lives, which means *taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance*. (xv, my emphasis).

This is the practicality of Appiah's argument: he raises the idea that cosmopolitanism starts with appreciating our differences. Cosmopolitanism, he argues, shouldn't be seen as a lofty attainment; it is a "simple idea" that begins with recognizing that interactions with the other are

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the connections between foreign policy and the civil rights movement see the work of Derrick Bell.

not a burden, but can be a pleasure (xx). We cannot wholly efface our differences in light of our common humanity, nor can we hierarchize our shared values in order to determine a homogenous global course of action. But what we can do, Appiah argues, is communicate with each other and value the knowledge attained from that communication (xxi).

Appiah's call for open and sincere dialogue brings me to my final point: how students of the liberal arts, often closed academic communities, can foster a cosmopolitan attitude that positively affects the larger community. We have a tendency to break off in groups and define ourselves by our beliefs: "I am a conservative," or "I am a feminist," "I am Buddhist," or "I belong to the New Democrat Party". In some ways our liberal educations serve to exaggerate our ideological differences, thus creating chasms between fundamentally similar people. While an engaged citizenry is undeniably a good thing, I believe our desire to close off into groups of like-minded people is antithetical to the kind of world we must cultivate. We need increased conversation between these groups; not the kind of dialogue that aims to convince the other to adopt a new point of view, but rather the kind of conversation where groups can come together and discover their many similarities. Cosmopolitanism is not about homogeneity, effacing our differences is not only impossible, but antithetical to the idea of a global community; rather, it is about being able to accept other's differences, and recognize the value in alternate perspectives. It is commonly acknowledged that this kind of "reaching across the aisle" is desperately needed in our political system, but rarely do we acknowledge the benefit this kind of action produces in our community lives. Good human conduct starts with not being afraid to break out of your routine, with moving beyond interactions with "one's own people".

Experience has shown me that universities can be meaningful theatres of action to stimulate this kind of cross-perspective dialogue. In the third year of my undergrad at St. Thomas

University in Fredericton, I had the privilege of being one of thirteen organizers of what became St. Thomas' first annual *Celebration of Faith in Diversity* conference. Under the supervision of Dr. Alexandra Bain of the Religion Studies Department we aimed to bring together Fredericton's faith traditions (Baha'i, Buddhist, First Nations, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Unitarian, Quaker and various Christian denominations) for a full day of meaningful dialogue. Dr. Bain had noticed the presence of multicultural festivals every year on campus, where international students were encouraged to demonstrate their cultures and traditions in the hopes of fostering a more diverse student body; yet religion was conspicuously absent from these events. Of course the university had various faith clubs (Youth for Christ, Alpha, Friday Muslim prayer, a daily Zen meditation practice, etc.), but these groups did not interact. This mirrored the larger civic community: a city where even the various sects of Christianity worshipped separately and rarely interacted. Over the three months leading up to the conference volunteer organizers worked with Fredericton's religious communities to help them prepare for communication with other groups in a sincere, courteous and thought-provoking way. Over the preparation period we tried to quell the anxiety many groups felt over interacting with what they anticipated to be radically different traditions. Some expressed overt insularity and suspicion of interacting with other faiths they viewed as antagonistic to their own. We began to seriously question if we could successfully accomplish this ambitious project, but in the end our labor was rewarded: the event was a success. Each group was given a half-hour to represent their beliefs and rituals to an audience of people with whom they shared a common, but diverse, belief in the transcendent. They came away with a new understanding of each other: their traditions weren't really as disparate as they had always assumed. Their diverse approach to the divine revealed a much deeper connection than they had previously acknowledged. And those groups who had hitherto expressed an anxiety about

interacting with outsiders have since voluntarily returned to the campus event to continue to recognize their common faith in diversity.

This is how the university, particularly liberal arts departments, can foster cosmopolitan sentiments that can carry us into a new era of global civility and interaction. Universities have the infrastructure and the capital, their teachers have the pedagogical expertise, and their students have the impassioned energy to bring people together. Appiah rightly asserts that cosmopolitanism begins with sincere and open dialogue. The hardest part is merely getting diverse people together with the intention of listening, interacting and learning; if one fosters that environment participants will often do the rest. Before our *Celebration of Faith in Diversity*, Fredericton's faith traditions were separatist communities. Now they have opened a channel of dialogue, and they have learned enough about the others' shared humanity that they genuinely desire to keep that channel open. This does not mean they have to abandon their own beliefs and communities; they merely have to be willing to weigh the humanity of the others fairly. Our event was a small step, but if those thirteen faith traditions go back to their places of worship and relay their positive experiences we have changed the state of religious discourse in our city. And as we live in a global community, with many of these faith groups maintaining strong ties to their places of origin, those who participated in our event, saw the CBC coverage, or were touched by the positive stories of members of their congregation, can spread their cosmopolitan attitudes throughout the world. Good human community starts small, but a sincere devotion to understanding and caring for others can truly change the world.

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