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The Cosmopolitan Impulse in an Entangled World

An Interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah

The hope of a Great Transition rests with an awakening of human solidarity and deepening of moral conscience. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a distinguished philosopher and cultural theorist, speaks with Tellus Senior Fellow Allen White about the kind of cosmopolitanism we now need and the moral forces propelling change.

Your biography—a British mother and an African father, eminent ancestries in two different cultures, formative years in both the UK and Ghana—is transnational from the outset. How did this heterogeneous background shape your identity and worldview?

I think it is always hard to discern the causal forces that are acting on you. But there's no doubt that having grown up between Europe and Africa was deeply formative. By my twenty-first birthday, I had spent about ten years in Ghana, ten in England, and a year in France, Germany, Switzerland, and a few other places. Such varied cultural experiences helped shape my worldview.

Perhaps even more important, though, my cosmopolitan parents had friends from everywhere. Eminent people from all over the world visited our home in Ghana, such as Nan Pandit, the sister of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru; Richard Wright, the novelist from the US; and C.L.R. James, the Caribbean intellectual. As we were a non-aligned nation, the university attracted faculty from the old Soviet Bloc and China, as well as from what we then called the West.

Thus, I was surrounded by people of international interconnections and outlook, who inevitably shaped my views. And the pattern continues in my family to this day. My oldest sister married a Norwegian, my middle sister married a Nigerian, my eldest nephew married a Namibian, his brother just had a daughter with a Russian wife, and so on. I didn't even mention my younger sister's various ethnic attachments because she's been married to people from so many countries that it's hard to keep up. And my husband is an American. So we've kept this cosmopolitan tradition going.

Cosmopolitanism has been a central philosophical concern of yours: an attempt to

reconcile commitments to the universal and the particular, the global and the local. You have summarized your cosmopolitanism as “universality plus difference.” Can you unpack this a little for us?

Many believe that there exists one universal system of values. For example, belief in the equality of all human beings is the official teaching of the Catholic Church and fundamental to most international socialists. Cosmopolitans share the conviction that everybody matters, which entails moral obligations to everybody. But they also stress recognizing that this belief doesn't mean that everybody has to live the same kind of life.

Instead, cosmopolitanism rests on the notion that there are many ways of leading a decent human life. Societies can put together different arrangements for leading a good life provided they respect basic human rights and entitle people to construct families, towns, cities, nations, and larger communities like the European Union or the African Union. They will do so in ways that will inevitably differ from one another. Why? Partly because people are different and partly because people come from different histories and different places with unique, longstanding characteristics and traditions. A person evolves from a starting point. And if you start from different places, you'll probably end up in different places.

Having a sense of universal respect doesn't mean wanting all people to be the same. Indeed, you value the fact that people are trying out (in John Stuart Mill's phrasing) different “experiments of living.” I live in a society that includes the Amish in Pennsylvania, ultra-orthodox Jews in New York City, liberal academics, and so many other kinds of people living so many kinds of lives. All side by side, mostly at peace with one another. Cosmopolitans among us are glad that the other people are doing their own thing. We don't want them to be forced to do our own thing.

You specifically advocate a “rooted cosmopolitanism” that blends place-based and global consciousness. Please explain this idea for us.

Some cosmopolitans, especially historically, have opposed the local. They rejected all local loyalties for loyalty to the cosmos, to humanity. This stance ignores a very important ethical truth: a decent human life must embrace certain forms of partiality. Pure impartiality isn't going to yield a decent human life. Pure impartiality means that if there is a toy to be given, you are indifferent to whether it goes to your child or the child next door. That is not the way parents behave—or should behave. A parent is someone who has a special relationship with his or her own child. I obviously shouldn't inflict harm on the children next door, but I have a special responsibility for my own children and family.

That responsibility extends to political communities as well. Special concern for your fellow citizen is not just a desirable choice; you ought to have such concern. You ought to care more about whether the people with whom you're bound in a particular community are doing well than you do about people at random. Again, of course, you shouldn't damage people in the rest of the world. And maybe there are obligations we have to them beyond a do-no-harm standard. I certainly believe this. But they're not the same as the obligations we have to the local.

On the aesthetic side, it's reasonable for us to have a special attachment to our own literature, art, and cultural traditions. They're ours. But that's not a reason for me not to listen to Bach on the grounds of "Well, he's German," or not to listen to Chinese opera on the grounds of "Well, it's not Western." Indeed, one of the great things about our species is that we try lots of different things.

This grand variety of individual contributions is one of the wonderful characteristics of humanity. I have a special responsibility for what I contribute, which is a unique ingredient in the larger pool of human creativity.

You exclude world government from your universalism, fearing that an overarching political authority would dissolve diversity and invite a global Leviathan. Yet, as nation-states have found ways to maintain difference within a shared international commitment, why couldn't a democratic global republic do the same at the transnational level?

My resistance is not so much to the idea of world government as to the idea of a world state. The Westphalian model of the state with a central authority could apply at the world level if a democratically regulated authority serves as the ultimate decision-maker in any dispute. In this scenario, disputes rise up through a process akin to the US federal court system with courts of appeals and a supreme court in the designated seat of government.

Multi-tiered government is good for society. If you enable political decisions as close to the ground as possible—that is, according to the principle of "subsidiarity"—you give individuals and communities a greater sense of power, of agency, in relation to their government. For example, the Kumasi town council in Ghana regulates garbage; the central government has nothing to do with it. When Kumasi does a lousy job, we fight with the mayor, not the prime minister or the president.

Still you do need supranational methods of adjudication. For example, you can't address global warming through communities' deciding one by one what they are going to do. A lot of politicians at the national level pretend there's this thing called national sovereignty, which they are giving away every time they agree to a treaty obligation. But they are also empowering themselves to act through those treaty obligations, enabling their country to do things they otherwise could not.

Although I do not believe in subsidiarity without qualification, what point is there in intervention from a higher level unless it is going to make things better? And a lot of free-floating humanitarian, human rights-based intervention has made things worse. We're trying to make the situation of the Iraqis better. We've failed. Life in Iraq has been terrible since the US invasion. When you consider intervention, always ask, "Will the intervention actually make things better?" It's one thing to think things are very bad; it's another thing to think you can do something reasonable to improve them.

Critics of global governance often point out how international accords are rarely

enforced. Do they have a point?

Yes, but there is certainly value in adopting laws with no teeth that embody an important idea. The UN declaration on access to safe water provides a good example. Nobody is enforcing it. It is designed to take a stand on a key aspect of human well-being: a decent human life includes fresh, clean running water from a tap that you don't have to walk five miles with a jug on your head to access. These sorts of declarations may remain unfulfilled for now; nonetheless, we are probably better off with them than without them. Besides, what seems quixotic today may become pragmatic tomorrow.

That said, there is a risk of discrediting the human rights idea. If enforcement is ineffective, eventually the system devolves into disrepute. Everybody agrees some activities should be prohibited. However, states that torture people, including sometimes the United States, don't declare their activities. Still, the official position is that it shouldn't happen.

Where obstacles stand in the way of progress, we must debate them. For example, we must show people in principle and in practice what a society looks like that empowers women and treats them equally. At a minimum, we have to show that such a society looks better than the society in which women are deprived of equal rights. Better for everybody: better for the husbands, fathers, and sons, as well as the wives, mothers, and daughters. In many places, simply affirming such a situation will not be convincing. You have to demonstrate its validity. It is not about enforcement, but about enactment through example and persuasion.

You have emphasized how the core attributes of so-called “Western” identity and civilization, e.g., liberty, tolerance, rational inquiry, are not exclusive to the European experience either geographically or philosophically. How can this understanding inform our work?

Calling values such as rational inquiry and tolerance “Western” is mistaken for two reasons. First, many people in the Sanskrit and Confucian traditions had ideas like these a very long time ago. Second, many ideas that we now think of as Western are hardly deeply rooted in Europe and North America. Look at the people screaming at Donald Trump rallies and tell me that America embraces tolerance. Or look at people's responses to global climate change and argue that America is the home of respect for rational inquiry.

So-called Western values are admirable; I am all for them. But claiming them for the West suggests that the battle is already over here. Values are only values if we live by them, which many do not. And if you call them “Western,” you'll put other people off, leading them to distance themselves from such values rather than embracing them.

Of course, there are many differences in national histories. But the idea that one cannot rely on scripture, but, instead, on empirical observation to understand how the world works is not fundamentally a Western idea. Much progress in science in Europe derives from interactions with non-Western intellectuals. The Renaissance saw a rebirth of such inquiry, enabled, in part, by earlier Arab understandings of ancient texts.

Other indications of non-Western origins of modern inquiry abound. Algebra is an Arabic word. Ancient Babylonian records were essential to the field of astronomy and thus to the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century in Western Europe. Newton did not just have an apple fall on his head one day, and—boom!—we have modern science. The history of scientific inquiry is far more complicated and multicultural than that.

It's silly to say that the West is the home of tolerance, even as the West does contain many tolerant people. We have to remember that Jews and Quakers were not allowed to attend Oxford or Cambridge until the mid-nineteenth century.

Then consider democracy, a pillar of "Western" civilization. When did Spain become a democracy? Only when I was a teenager. Democracy in much of Europe was reintroduced in a feeble form after the fall of the Berlin wall or the collapse of the Soviet Union. Is Russia a democracy? Are Hungary and Poland not turning away from democracy? These nations are generally identified as "Western." In other words, if you think democracy is forever secure without a fight, think again. We have to fight for it every day.

In your book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, you analyze how moral progress occurs on the societal level. What important "moral revolutions" do you see incubating in today's rapidly changing world? Which ones do you hope to see?

I think we are due for a revolution in our attitudes toward work. Since the industrial revolution, we have developed a culture in which people are defined by their occupation. An occupation provided money, meaning, and social life, not to mention status.

Jobs also created, for the rest of us, a very efficient way of producing and sharing the massively increasing product of industrial societies. That compact was solidified in the twentieth century by the growth of a kind of working-class politics and its associated trade unions that secured for the typical industrial worker a combination of rights, goods, and rising income, along with meaning and social connections in the factory and trade union hall. This trend became stronger in the postwar period, with increasing incomes and access to television, telephones, refrigerators, and indoor toilets. None of these goods were available to working people in a country like Britain in 1940. By 1960, they were widespread.

This whole deal has fallen apart. The jobs have gone away, and the new jobs are less meaningful, less social in nature, and less well-paying.

We need a new compact. And I have no idea what shape it will take. I think the fact that we're talking about a universal basic income in the United States is very surprising because it's about as "socialist" as you can get. This kind of change, like the change that produced the industrial world, involves cultural change, imaginative change, and institutional change. And it's clearly connected with technological change in the form of robots and automation.

While it's hard to wrap your mind around a new compact, I am confident that in a quarter of a century that whole package will look very different than it does today. The early stage in these

kinds of revolutions can be very blurry. Consider the abolition of slavery, a momentous moral revolution. When the Quakers presented their first petition against slavery to the British Parliament in the late eighteenth century, nobody would have predicted that in twenty years Britain would abolish its slave trade. Such an act would have been deemed preposterous; people would have laughed.

In the face of the perilous global challenges we face, the cosmopolitan impulse, as you note, “is no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity.” What is your advice to those who share this belief, whether activists, policymakers, entrepreneurs, or citizens?

First, I'd tell educational leaders to help kids to recognize the cosmopolitan point of view. More broadly, what we can do is educate students on how to act morally, cultivating new and better ways of living together in a society and on a planet. This includes, at the very least, not damaging the world for everybody else. Such lessons prepare people for lives as citizens of the world.

Second, in the domain of public policy, and at the risk of sounding neoliberal, I think we should continue down the path of liberalized trade while mitigating the adverse effects on those disadvantaged by such trade. Also, in opposition to the dominant political discourse these days, I advocate increased rates of legal migration. The same economic arguments that support moving capital to where it's needed apply to moving people where they are needed. We can absorb, and have historically absorbed, large numbers of migrants in the United States. But we have to be careful to distribute them in ways that avoid a backlash.

And third, let's think seriously about the future of work. Work insecurity fuels tribalism, and tribalism is antithetical to cosmopolitanism. We need a public conversation about meaning, stability, income, retraining, and other aspects of work in a rapidly changing world. Without large-scale, coherent policy changes, we risk the continued spread of the alienation and divisiveness that today afflicts the US and many other nations.

About the Interviewee



Kwame Anthony Appiah is a British-born, Ghanaian-American philosopher and cultural theorist. He is a Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University and the author of the weekly *Ethicist* column in the *New York Times*. He has taught at Yale, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, and Princeton, and has written widely in philosophy, especially in ethics and political philosophy, and in African and African-American Studies. He is the author of *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, and *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*, and more than a dozen other philosophical works, three novels, and hundreds of articles and reviews. With Henry Louis Gates Jr., he edited the *Encarta Africana* for Microsoft and the five-volume *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*. He holds a PhD from Cambridge University.

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