



February 2020

Reasserting Moral Cosmpolitanism

Forum contribution: [Toward a Great Ethics Transition](#)

Luis Cabrera

Brendan Mackey's [essay](#) calling for renewed attention to the Earth Charter is a timely piece and a reminder of how much times have changed. It is timely because, in an era where the world hurtles toward devastating and potentially irreversible effects from climate change, the Charter's opening line seems even more apt now than two decades ago: "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future."

The essay reminds us how much times have changed because it reminds us of the post–Cold War optimism animating the Earth Charter and other efforts which sought to promote global ethical/moral standards backed by reformed global governance institutions, for example, the World Environment Organization for which Mackey calls. It reminds us how that optimism deflated after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US-led "war on terror," and how it has further receded in an era of global democratic retreat and right-wing populism ascending across Europe and in the United States, Brazil, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Today, instead of President George H. W. Bush's call for a "New World Order," the leader of the system's most powerful state wields the word "globalist" as an epithet, as in his September 2019 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, when he declared, "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots."

Mackey's essay is valuable in part for acknowledging the changed climate, but also for insisting that a continuing commitment to the values and vision of efforts such as the Earth Charter is not misplaced, and that it is important to continue advocating for them and seeking to promote institutional changes. The essay's concerns intersect, in fact, with a significant vein of academic thinking on how to actually motivate support for cosmopolitan moral principles, meaning ones

which treat all persons' interests as equally morally significant. Critics have held that most persons simply won't be persuaded to take on any demanding duties across international borders, thus moral cosmopolitanism is a practical nonstarter. Mackey's essay highlights and confronts a similar challenge.

Some cosmopolitan thinkers have responded by examining ways in which psychological tendencies to develop empathy for others under certain circumstances could be encouraged through policy, educational, and civil society efforts. Others have focused on ways people tend to be motivated to avoid causing harm, and they have highlighted ways in which the relatively affluent globally are implicated in structural harms visited on the global poor. Some others have taken a tack implied in Mackey's essay of emphasizing collective harms arising in a global system when each state or people simply pursues its own perceived interests. Finally, some have pinned their hopes on intensifying globalization creating a backlash that would result not in populist and nativist *disintegration*, but in calls from below for much greater popular participation in the processes of global economic integration.

Each cosmopolitan motivation or realization strategy faces intensified challenges in the right-wing populist era. The challenge for each is distinctive to their differing strategies, but they all face a common task exemplified by Mackey's essay: providing a cosmopolitan or global-ethical counter-narrative to the populist denouncement of straw-person "globalists." As Mackey emphasizes, it can be crucial to offer that alternative in public discourse, to maintain it as another possibility for when political winds may once more shift, and to help make such a shift more possible.

About the Author



Luis Cabrera is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Griffith Asia Institute and School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. His research has focused on trans-state normative issues, including human rights, citizenship and migration, and the development of democratically accountable regional and global political institutions. His books include *The Practice of Global Citizenship*, *The Theory of Global Justice*, and *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-state Democracy*. Before turning to academia full time, Cabrera worked as a staff reporter for The Associated Press in Seattle. He holds a PhD from the University of Washington.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Luis Cabrera, "Reasserting Moral Cosmopolitanism," forum contribution (Toward a Great Ethics Transition), *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/ethics-transition-cabrera>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.