

Cosmopolitanism and Issues of Ethical Identity

(Yubraj Aryal interviewed Kwame Anthony Appiah on Cosmopolitanism and Issues of Ethical Identity. Mr Aryal focused his questions on some of the recent issues on cosmopolitanism and ethical identity.)

Y. A: *What, if any, moral obligations are attached to our ethnic identity?*

KAA: I'm inclined to say that the most straightforward answer to your questions is: None. That's because I think it's not the ethnic identity itself but the particular features of the way it works in social and ethical life that is likely to generate moral obligations, not the ethnic identity as such. In a moment, I'll give you some examples of the sort of thing I have in mind. But first, I think it's important to distinguish between ethnic identities and national identities in approaching this question. By national identities, I mean, roughly, ethnic identities that are identified with a modern nation state. For national identities, the major obligations we have are in virtue of our shared citizenship: they are political obligations, civic duties. But where an ethnic identity is not a national one, where it is not associated with a state, the answers are more various, I believe, because ethnic identities are various and so are the relations of individual people to their ethnic identities. As you know, I am inclined to approach such questions from the perspective of the individual. So I would begin by saying that one of the central questions many people have, wherever they live, is whether they take their ethnic identity up as an important element of who they are. I don't say "whether they *chose* to take their ethnic identity up," because in some contexts you may have little choice as to whether you take your ethnic identity seriously, because you live in a society where others will respond to you as a member of some ethnic group, whether you like it or not. What sociologists call "ascriptive identities"—like gender and, in many places, race—shape your experience of the social world because others are going to respond to you as a member of the group, whatever you chose.

Of course, you still have choices to make, about how you are going to respond to an identity ascribed to you by others. But where your identity is a subordinated identity, so that powerful social groups are able to dominate people of your ethnicity, one natural response is to develop a norm of solidarity: we will work together to relieve our social burden. What sort of argument could you develop for the view that this might be not just a natural response, nor even just an attractive response, but an actual duty? Well, if there are other members of your group who are engaging in a social movement to relieve the burdens of ethnic oppression, and you are benefiting from their struggle, you might have a duty to bear your fair share of the burden of the struggle. After all, we normally suppose that we have a duty of fairness to share the burdens of sustaining institutions and practices from which we profit. (That's why we often condemn so-called "free-riders":



people who, metaphorically speaking, take the train but don't pay for the ticket.) These obligations go along with obligations that everyone has, which derive from considerations of justice, to work to undo social oppression.

You might also think that where an ethnic group is carrying a particular cultural tradition that is of value, its members might feel they ought each to contribute to protecting that cultural tradition, as long as doing so doesn't place a great burden on them, something that will get in the way of their living a decent life. People who are especially well-placed to contribute to an important goal ought, generally speaking, I think, to pursue it if they can.

So, against a particular background, I think ethnic obligations can arise, but, as I say, I think it does just depend on the background. And usually what sustains ethnic practices isn't duty but desire: people value some of the ways of doing things that they grew up with and they keep them going for that reason, not because they feel obliged. Even when they do feel obliged, it will often be an obligation of piety—a sense that you should do things for your parents and earlier ancestors, to sustain a legacy they have left you. I am inclined to think that piety of this sort is attractive, where the practices being sustained are not themselves morally dubious. But I don't think that, in general, we ought to do everything our elders want (or would have wanted) us to. And at the heart of my view is the thought that mostly, once we have done what universal morality requires of us, we have to select, from among the very many identities we have available to us, the ones that we are going to make central to our lives. Once you've done that with an ethnic identity, you have obligations that are essentially obligations to your own vision of the good life for yourself and your community; obligations you undertook, not obligations that arise independently of your interpretation of your situation and your decisions.

Y. A: *You claim that nationality, religion, race, culture and ethnicity can provide no legitimate ground for our ethical identity because such ideas restrict our freedom, justice and creativity. You put forth the alternative (cosmopolitan) view of identity based on universal human values. It's not hard for me to agree with the first part of your claim. But I am a bit skeptical about the second part. My skepticism is not on the normative ground even though I have no answer who eventually decides/legitimizes what is universal: whether God or George W. Bush or Osama Bin Laden; whether people like me who live in metropolitan locations or a poor illiterate native peasant who works at this time in my field back in Nepal, but on practical grounds. Many people believe that freedom, democracy, justice and human rights are not American values but they are universal values. True! But does this advocacy prevent a "sophisticated form of cruelty" that the West has been imposing on African/Asian soils? Where are the problems here?*

K. A. A: I think that your question presupposes that I am more opposed to local identities than I really am! But I hope I've made clear why that is, in my answer to your first question. Still, the problem of how to ground the universal is a central challenge for my view. I think there are two classes of issues that we have to take seriously here. One class is philosophical: what moral claims are correct? That's a substantive first-order moral question. What grounds these truths? A question in metaphysics. How should we proceed

to discover and support moral claims? A question in epistemology. I have views on all these questions, as do many people. Some of them are to be found in my recent book *Experiments in Ethics*.

The second class of questions is more broadly political: how should we go about reaching agreement on which values we will all take seriously and seek to enforce in national and international law?

My cosmopolitan proposal is about the second question. It is that we should engage in conversation across societies, seeking to understand the views of others about all these questions, and see if we can come to agree about some universal principles we are willing to endorse together and enforce across nations. That is how human rights treaties arise in the ideal case. I do not favor this solution because I think there is an argument that it will lead to the recognition of moral principles that are, as a philosophical matter, true, well-grounded and believed for sufficient reasons. I favor it because I favor living together in peace across the planet and I think that this approach is more likely to achieve that than the alternatives that I know of. One of the contributions of philosophers to this global conversation will be their answers to the philosophical questions, the questions in the first class. These will no doubt look different if you start from Buddhist ideas or Confucian ideas or Christian ideas than if you start from contemporary Western liberal ideas, but that is where we must start: we must each start where we are.

But I want to be clear that there are certain basic values that I am committed to so strongly that I will seek to have them achieved whether or not everyone agrees with me about them. I believe in women's equality and I am in favor of policies that advance it, even in societies where people have principled (though, in my view, mistaken) objections to that ideal. As a cosmopolitan, I am skeptical that you can in fact advance such an ideal anywhere unless you have done the work of trying to understand why people disagree ... except at the cost of doing terrible things. But if we have done that work—the work of conversation—and we still think something is wrong and those who think it wrong can work together to change it in ways that respect the humanity of others, then I think we should. It's just that much such intervention has tended to be disrespectful or ineffective or immoral . . . which no doubt helps to account for your skepticism!

Y. A: *How does your cosmopolitan view of identity make irrelevant to the counterclaim that libratory values for African people should be sought within their own culture without subscribing to a stranger's pretentious 'so called' 'universal' values?*

K. A. A: I don't have the feeling that most African people want to free themselves in the name of local traditions. Mostly nationalist movements in Africa proceeded by asking not that Africans should be treated in special African ways, but that they should be treated as their humanity entitles them to be treated. But, of course, ideals have local inflections and, as I said a little while ago, everyone has to start from where they are. My view is that, in the African society I know best, which is urban Asante in Ghana, after well over a century of interaction with the West and with Christianity in particular, and a longer period of interaction with Islam, the normative vocabulary of most ordinary people is not very different from that of people in many other places.

So, for example, I've just finished writing a book about the concept and practice of honor. In my father's language there are many ways of talking about respect, which I believe is the core concept in the world of honor; they may be slightly different from ancient Roman or modern British or American ideas about honor, but not so different that we can't have a perfectly satisfactory cross-national conversation about the topic. But, to reiterate, I believe we should each bring our ideas to the global conversation. We will all be changed by those exchanges, so that no one will come back from a real conversation with their ideas totally unrevised. And the presupposition of cosmopolitan conversation is that we are happy to talk to everyone who is willing to join in, that the conversation belongs to all of us and therefore no one is in charge of an agenda, and that therefore if people have distinctive local ideas they want to share, they are welcome. If people don't want to share their ideas that is also okay. But I believe that we will get along together better if some people from each place are willing to share with people from other places.

Y. A.: *Your radical claim "The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world we can ask race to do for us. . . ." I agree with you. But what about the socially constructed forms of race under which the West imposed ruthless slavery in Africa, even African elitist bourgeoisie who imposed/are imposing injustice and inhumanity on the indigenous populations using tropes of race? What is the ontological status of constructed races?*

K. A. A: Races are real in the way in which social constructions are real: people are black and white in the way that people are witches. People assign racial categories to other people in relatively systematic ways and then respond to them in the light of those assignments. As a result, you can't ignore the racial conceptions of a society, and so you have to have strategies of response (Ditto, of course, for witchcraft. If you do the sorts of things that witches are supposed to do, you must be prepared to be treated as a witch). But conceptions of race are usually both confused and contested. And, because they often presuppose mistaken ideas about biology, in many cases there is no correct answer to the question what race someone "really" is. If there are arguments grounded in the social practices of race that say that someone is, say, black (in America) and arguments grounded in the social practice of race that say she is white (in America) too, I don't think it's up to metaphysicians to figure out who's right. Is someone who is light-skinned—"white-looking," as we might say—but has darker-skinned parents who identify as African-American, "really" black or "really" white. My view is that once you understand racial practices you will see that this isn't a sensible question. There may be people whose history and phenotype mean that the only label they can sensibly be given in America is "black." Ditto for "white." But there are lots of people whom we could assign either way. Just recall that, because the lighter-skinned children of black Americans often "passed" for white—adopting a social identity as a white person—there are millions of Americans whose ancestors were African slaves and who are now sure they are white. On some conceptions they are right, on others they are wrong. I don't believe that it makes sense to choose between these conceptions ontologically.