

## Cosmopolitanism: A Defence

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*David Miller is right that weak cosmopolitanism is undistinctive and strong cosmopolitanism implausibly curtails associative duties. But there are intermediate views that avoid both of these problems. One such view holds that compatriotism makes no difference to our most important negative duties and that among these is the duty not to impose unjust social institutions upon other human beings. On this view, our duty not to impose an unjust institutional order on foreigners is exactly as stringent as our duty not to impose an unjust institutional order upon our compatriots. This view is not trivial; it has important consequences for our moral responsibilities in the world as it is. And it is compatible with associative duties insofar as these increase what we owe to some without decreasing what we owe to persons at large.*

Building on David Miller's excellent clarificatory work in the preceding note, let me state my contrasting position within his framework.

Miller distinguishes two versions of cosmopolitanism: *Weak cosmopolitanism* is the anodyne view that all human beings are of equal worth. *Strong cosmopolitanism* is the view that all human agents ought to treat all others equally and, in particular, have no more, or less, reason to help any one needy person than any other.

Miller then makes three claims, all of which I fully accept:

1. *Weak cosmopolitanism does not entail strong cosmopolitanism.*
2. *Strong cosmopolitanism is false.*
3. *Weak cosmopolitanism is undistinctive in the sense that almost anyone ('barring a few racists and other bigots') accepts it.*

If there is to be anything to debate, there must then be another recognisably cosmopolitan view that goes substantially beyond weak

cosmopolitanism and yet not so far as to entail strong cosmopolitanism. Let me sketch one such intermediate view.

Miller refutes strong cosmopolitanism with the example of the missing child. He rightly insists that my moral reason to help find the child depends on my relationship to her: I have more moral reason to volunteer when she is my daughter or niece than when she is a stranger – surely. When she is a stranger, then perhaps I also have more reason to volunteer if she is a fellow citizen or fellow resident or at least went missing in my country – I am not sure how Miller's nationalism would draw the line here. In any case, his example suffices to refute strong cosmopolitanism: we do not all have equal responsibilities to everyone.

But let me suggest that the stringency of our most important negative duties does not vary with the presence or absence of compatriotism. You do not have more moral reason not to murder a compatriot than you have not to murder a foreigner. And you do not moderate your condemnation of a rapist when you learn that his victim was not his compatriot.

So, one plank of my intermediate cosmopolitanism is the claim that *compatriotism makes no difference to our most important negative duties*.

Is this a recognisably cosmopolitan claim? Miller suggests that it is not, saying: 'If we were truly world citizens, then equal responsibilities [to all persons worldwide] would certainly follow.' I dispute this conditional simply by pointing to its domestic analogue: 'If we were truly citizens of the UK, then equal responsibilities to all citizens of the UK would certainly follow.' This analogous conditional is false. As Miller emphasises himself in the context of his missing-child case, citizens of a state can have greater responsibilities to their family members than to compatriot strangers. So Miller cannot deny the label *cosmopolitan* to the intermediate view merely on the ground that this view is not committed to the equal-responsibilities claim.

Still, *citizen* is a political term. So, to make the intermediate position more *cosmopolitan*, let me elaborate its political aspects by focusing on one important duty we have as citizens to our fellow citizens: the duty not to impose unjust social institutions upon them.

To fix ideas, let us roughly distinguish two basic ways in which an institutional order can be unjust: It can be unjust, first, by doing violence to participants' basic needs, conceived narrowly as an absolute threshold. These kinds of injustice can be expressed as human-rights violations, as when a society's institutional order is such that some of the persons

living under it are being tortured, prevented from practicing their cultural commitments with like-minded others, or unable to meet their basic economic needs. An institutional order can be unjust, second, by producing excessive political, social, or economic inequalities – in rights or duties, for example, in educational or employment opportunities, or in social status or income and wealth.

It is not sufficient for injustice that an institutional order falls short in either of these two respects. It is necessary also that this shortfall be reasonably avoidable through some feasible institutional alternative. If both conditions are fulfilled, the institutional order in question is unjust. And so is collaboration in its imposition on others.

As citizens, we have a fundamental duty of justice toward our fellow citizens: not to collaborate in imposing an unjust institutional order upon them. I see this as a stringent, negative duty – though this duty may, like many other negative duties, be fulfilled by positive action. When I find myself a citizen of a seriously unjust state, I may fulfill my negative duty as citizen, for instance, by working for institutional reforms or by helping to protect the victims of injustice (positive action), by ceasing to work and to pay taxes (negative actions) or by leaving the country (involving both positive and negative elements).

Let me contrast citizens' fundamental duty of justice with other duties they may have to one another. Miller discussed two such duties:

to do one's share in 'institutionalised reciprocity' which may provide for special needs and much else, and

to do one's share toward 'projects that reflect the cultural beliefs and values of the [society's] members'.

Insofar as these two duties go beyond citizens' duty of justice, as the latter clearly does, they are less fundamental in two respects. First, citizens' duty of justice is *unconditional*: they have this duty whether they, individually or collectively, want to have it or not. Much institutionalised reciprocity and all cultural projects, by contrast, are discretionary: societies are not morally required to engage in either (as Miller acknowledges by speaking of 'political communities of the sort I am considering'). Second, citizens' duty of justice is also *more stringent*: the imposition of unjust institutions cannot be justified either by the goal of providing for some citizens' special needs or by the goal of pursuing cultural projects. The requirements of justice are paramount.

The general account I have just given is widely accepted, I think, though people differ, of course, in how they specify the demands of justice – the absolute ones (human rights) and the relative ones. But let us leave the details to one side and see how this general account of justice can be extended beyond the state.

Intermediate cosmopolitanism asserts the fundamental negative duty of justice as one that every human being owes to every other. This is its second plank: We have a negative duty not to impose an unjust institutional order upon *any* human beings – compatriots or foreigners. We citizens of the powerful democracies would be violating this duty if we used our overwhelming military and economic superiority to impose an unjust institutional order upon the rest of the world or any part thereof.

Taking both planks together, we see that intermediate cosmopolitanism goes very substantially beyond its weak cousin: It holds that we have a negative duty not to collaborate in imposing an unjust institutional order upon foreigners, and that this duty has the same stringency as our negative duty not to collaborate in the imposition of an unjust institutional order upon compatriots. Given this equal stringency, there is actually no point in distinguishing two duties. Put more concisely, intermediate cosmopolitanism asserts simply that *all* persons have a negative duty of very high stringency toward *every* human being not to collaborate in imposing an unjust institutional order upon him or her.

I am committed to this assertion. But my point here is not to defend it – only to show that it meets the three desiderata Miller so rightly insists upon:

It goes substantially beyond any weak cosmopolitanism.

It avoids the righteous idiocy of strong cosmopolitanism.

And it is recognisably cosmopolitan by offering a plausible specification of the demand that we should understand and conduct ourselves as citizens of the world.

In conclusion, let us examine a point that Miller touches upon and Samuel Scheffler has treated at great length in his *Boundaries and Allegiances* (Scheffler 2001: 56–64, 83–95) The point is this: I accept that ‘political communities of the sort [Miller is] considering’ give rise to special responsibilities and associative duties. I accept, that is, that persons, by being citizens of a state, may owe less to foreigners than to compatriots. How can I accept this and still call myself a cosmopolitan?

My response begins by reiterating the domestic analogue: Families of the sort we want to belong to give rise to special responsibilities and associative duties, and thus you can, by being a member of such a family, come to owe less to outsiders than to your kin. If you can nonetheless still call yourself a citizen of the UK, why should I not still call myself a citizen of the world, despite my special responsibilities to my family and to my compatriots?

But there is a more interesting point here, below the surface. Miller and Scheffler suppose that special responsibilities and associative duties must dilute my duties to outsiders. Thus Scheffler writes that 'part of what it is to have [special] responsibilities to one's associates is to be required, within limits, to give their interests priority over the interests of non-associates, in cases where the two conflict' (2001: 87). I accept what Scheffler writes, but I deny the asserted dilution. How can I do this?

I can do this by retreating even further from strong cosmopolitanism than Miller and Scheffler do. In my view, it is perfectly permissible for you to help one needy stranger and not another, even when the latter's needs are somewhat greater. You may give to one beggar and not to another, may pay one poor stranger's medical treatment and not another's, and so on. And you may do this because you like the story of the one, or her face, or because you are in a good mood, or for no reason at all. In short, within certain limits you may give priority, in your beneficial conduct, to some persons over others *even when there is no special relationship that could rationalise this unequal treatment*.

If a special relationship enters the picture, then this moral discretion may disappear. You may be morally free to help needy stranger Arundhati rather than Peter or to help needy stranger Peter rather than Arundhati – even if the other's need is somewhat greater. But if you have a special relationship with Peter in this same situation, then you may *owe* it to Peter to help him at the expense of stranger Arundhati even if her need is somewhat greater.

Given this special relationship, you owe less to Arundhati *than you owe to Peter*. But this is not a problem for me so long as you do not, thanks to your special relationship with Peter, owe less to Arundhati *than you would have owed her otherwise*. A special relationship with Peter can obligate you to give priority to Peter over stranger Arundhati in all and only those cases where, even without this special relationship, you would have been morally permitted to prefer Peter to Arundhati. To put it concisely: special relationships can *increase* what we owe our associates,

but they cannot *decrease* what we owe everyone else. Whatever you must not, for Peter's sake, do to Arundhati when you have no special relationship with Peter, you likewise must not do for his sake to Arundhati when you do have a special relationship with Peter.

All this applies to compatriotism as a special case. Miller is right that persons may, by living together in a political community, *increase* what they owe one another, well above what they owe to human beings in general. I accept this; of course. But I add this qualification: Persons can *not*, by living together in a political community, *decrease* what they owe foreigners.

If intermediate cosmopolitanism is correct, then, though we owe foreigners less than compatriots, we owe them something. We owe them various negative duties, undiluted. One of these is the fundamental negative duty not to impose an unjust institutional order upon them. Fulfilling this duty would not be very burdensome for us. Yet it would prevent a few million child deaths annually from poverty-related causes and much other suffering besides. But this is a different story (discussed in Pogge 2002).

Here I have sought neither to demonstrate that intermediate cosmopolitanism is true, nor to show what it entails for the world in which we live. I have merely tried to convince you that there is such an intermediate cosmopolitanism as a possible moral view that makes some sense.

#### REFERENCES

- Pogge, T. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights*. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
Scheffler, S. 2001. *Boundaries and Allegiances*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.