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CURRENT ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

Volume 12, Issue 2 (Spring 2010)

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SPECIAL SECTION

Responses to Volume 12, Issue 1

Cosmopolitanism and our Descriptions of Ethics and Ontology: A Response to Dale Snauwaert's "The Ethics and Ontology of Cosmopolitanism"

David T. Hansen

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In recent years scholars across the humanities and social sciences have revitalized the ancient concept of cosmopolitanism. Dale Snauwaert illuminates why this is so in his thoughtful article on what it might mean to educate for a shared humanity. Snauwaert shows why many people find so-called "realism" an unsatisfactory political and moral orientation toward the world (also see Lu, 2000). States do have an obligation, if they are to be legitimate, to secure the safety of their citizens. But states have no privileged insight into how to develop such security. Indeed, history demonstrates time and again how benighted states have proven to be on this score. Moreover, a peaceful social and political order is not merely a matter of specific, state-based negotiations and treaties. It is as much a matter of carefully preparing the ground for a tolerant, pacific response to disagreement. Such ground-preparation is not undertaken by states as such but rather by a countless array of transnational institutions, communications, and exchanges between scientists, artists, educators, medical people, jurists, and more (cf. Waldron, 2006). If divorced from these long-standing and *real* processes, so-called realism becomes merely a mode of cynicism, a pinched and hopeless outlook on the human condition. It is emphatically not our destiny to see the world in this way. Rather it is a *choice* to do so, and it is a choice which (as history also shows) often has the nightmarish consequence of becoming self-fulfilling.

In contrast with so-called realism, Snauwaert argues for a universal cosmopolitanism. He highlights Gandhi's notion of the interconnectedness of all life, or what might be called a shared right to life on the part of all living beings including persons. No individual or community has a greater right to life than others. Thus to kill in violence destroys not only others (literally) but also the perpetrator's own humanity. All are reduced to mere things rather than beings with an inherent dignity. Snauwaert argues that these moral principles provide the ontological ground upon which to build a cosmopolitan ethics and politics. He contends that an awareness of and active respect for this ground emerges through self-transformation. Education becomes, at its center, the process of self-transformation on the part of people everywhere. In turn, that process presumably will lead people to demand that their states re-conceive the meaning of security and safety. Instead of envisioning the latter as requiring a bunkered, go-it-alone mentality, leaders of state and its various official institutions can themselves undergo modes of transformation in light of the principles of interconnectedness and of a shared, universal moral identity.

Snauwaert's discussion illuminates what has been called "strong" cosmopolitanism. This outlook spotlights universal values and norms. More than that, it suggests that such values and norms "*take precedence over local and national political and moral values and principles*" (Snauwaert, p. 1, italics added). Martha Nussbaum, a leading theorist of strong cosmopolitanism, argues:

...the accident of where one is born is just that, an accident; any human being might have been born in any nation... We may give what is near to us a special degree of attention and concern...[but] we should always remember that these features of placement are incidental and that our fundamental allegiance is to what is human (1997, pp. 31, 33).

This outlook can be contrasted with “weak,” “thin,” or what some have called “rooted” cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2005, 2006; Cohen, 1992; Hollinger 1995, 2002). Thinkers in this camp argue for what they regard as a more balanced and realistic picture in which moral obligations are in many cases properly rooted in local traditions and practices. Appiah and others suggest it is possible even if not always easy to enact local norms while also taking seriously universal notions of shared human dignity. They reject an *a priori* designation of the universal as morally trumping the local. For Appiah, “a cosmopolitanism with prospects must reconcile a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of at least some forms of [moral] partiality... [Cosmopolitanism is] a composite project, a negotiation between disparate tasks” (2005, pp. 223, 232).

Both thick and thin notions of cosmopolitanism acknowledge the complexity of human affairs and the permanent need for judgment. As Immanuel Kant once put it, “virtue” or a moral disposition is not a settled accomplishment. The reality is that virtue is the “moral disposition in conflict” (Kant, 1993, p. 88 [Academy 84]; also see p. 33 [Academy 33]). In this light it becomes significant to consider not just what values people endorse but also how they hold and enact them (cf. Hansen, et al., 2009). Human values differ widely, and these differences often necessitate difficult compromises and uneasy conciliations. It makes a difference whether persons are steely and defensive about their values, or supple and generous-minded in their expression.

The distinction between strong and rooted has helped scholars extract from the concept cosmopolitanism what it can contribute to contemporary concerns about justice and equity. One lesson to draw from the debate is that, in the very spirit of cosmopolitanism, we might look beyond what Snauwaert characterizes as ethics and ontology. This gaze is not easy to try out in the face of the weighty figure of Mohandas Gandhi and Snauwaert’s trenchant remarks about his universal outlook. But I am not convinced that what Snauwaert calls Gandhi’s “ontological grounding” is in fact “essential” for the project of world justice. I am not persuaded it is the only alternative to the sort of vulgar pragmatism Snauwaert is concerned to avoid, and rightly so since the other side of the reductionist coin of “realism” is the claim that human nature is “a complete social construction” (Snauwaert, p. 6). Indeed, perhaps the idea that everything human is socially constructed all the way down is the natural – or nihilistic, as Snauwaert suggests – consequence of so-called realism.

But must we assert that human beings “have” an inherent moral dignity that “must” be acknowledged in order for justice to prevail? Or might we assert that human beings are always on the way to dignity, and that we are always in search of better and better accounts of this quest for dignity, and better and better mechanisms for supporting it? Can we say that philosophy, poetry, literature, painting, friendship and conversation are not merely expressions of what “already is” but rather are, at least as often, striving to express what is not yet, and therefore cannot be contained by concepts such as “social construction” and “dignity” as typically construed? Do we need “awareness” of the interconnectedness of all life, and awareness of a supposed “essential unity” of humanity, in order to cultivate rich grounds for humane and just forms of relation? Or

do we need recognition of our shared creativity that can be seen in all that we dub “culture”?

Here I imagine culture at three levels: the familiar anthropological plane wherein communities reconfigure practices and ideals, the level of cultures of art (teaching, practicing science, musical traditions the world over, etc.) in which new forms and techniques emerge in often surprising ways, and the level of the individual person endeavoring to cultivate (“culturate”) her or his life as meaningfully and seriously as circumstances permit. The recognition of cultural creativity at these levels can generate a deep, robust sense of hope in what humans *can* accomplish if they give themselves over to the task, as many have done across the ages.¹ Moreover, in this task people do not need to “be” cosmopolitan, as if they must take on a new identity. It is more judicious to say they can be *cosmopolitan-minded* and *cosmopolitan-hearted* in various moments amidst the vicissitudes of their highly local, particularized lives.

As sympathetic as I am with just about everything Snauwaert has put forward in his article, I remain concerned that a fixed, *a priori* conception of human nature can inadvertently end up becoming state-like. It can argue for itself and for “the safety of humanity” against rival conceptions that would be cast out as anti-universal, anti-dignity, and anti-human. I believe we humans can afford a greater confidence than that, as unsettling, uncertain, and harrowing as such a posture will sometimes be. The truth is that there will be further injustices perpetuated in our time and in the human time ahead. But it is not clear that the road to taming them lies in finding a final, permanent conception of human nature, as much as it lies in learning to recognize and cultivate humane interactions in the here and now as well as the institutions that can support them. Perhaps a redeeming feature of human nature, whatever else it may be, is the capacity to re-imagine and redirect its nature in spontaneous, creative ways. Perhaps human dignity resides, at least in part, in the insight that we have no final characterization of that dignity. Call this the dignity of standing back from descriptions in order to act in ever-responsive ways in an unpredictable cosmos. Here the quotidian cosmopolitanism of the street, reported on in an increasing number of studies (cf. Cheah & Robbins, 1998), points the way as surely as does Gandhi, doubtless one of the most aware human beings who ever walked the planet.

Endnotes

1. Ruaridh MacLeod rightly pointed out that an analysis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment could shore up this perspective on cultural creativity, in part by clarifying why Kant’s overall orientation on the moral cannot be assimilated into a narrow, universalistic outlook. I hope to take up this suggestion on a larger canvas than this response article provides.

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