Communitarianism and cosmopolitanism in terms of global accountability

Economics, Globalization

A central issue in Ethics as it relates to international relations is the question of what we owe to others. In an age of ever-increasing interconnectedness and relations across borders the concept of ' global citizenship' is progressively becoming more prevalent in any discussion regarding such matters. Despite this incredible complexity, there are just two main schools of thought in this debate of our ethical duties, that of communitarianism, and cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is the more universalist approach that would be inclined to support the idea of global citizenship on the basis that we should have moral concern, and indeed obligation, for humanity as a whole, without distinctions based upon any recognized borders. Conversely, communitarianism would agree with the notion that our ethical duties should focus upon and prioritize improving the well-being of our fellow national citizens. This perspective prioritizes the importance of self-governance and autonomy within individual communities and argues that expanding that outside of a community doesn't make sense as our concept of rights and duties are only applicable contextually. While both perspectives have undoubted value, and as with most issues the answer lies somewhere in between, this essay will argue for a predominately communitarian approach, drawing in aspects of cosmopolitanism to introduce some level of global accountability.

The fundamental flaw of cosmopolitanism lies in its heavy-handed nature, that is that often fails to take into account the nuance of a situation and thus misses any contextual clues that may lead to a greater outcome. This weakness is due to the intrinsically deontological nature of cosmopolitanism, that is its focus on actions as right or wrong in and of themselves, failing to

fully consider the context of said actions or any consequences they may cause. An example of this can be found investigating the foreign policy debate as captured by Sachs and Easterly, who can be seen as representing the two sides of the argument, communitarianism and cosmopolitanism. Sachs argues that the best form of foreign aid is to inject resources into communities that need it such as the program to give away free mosquito nets in poor countries with high malaria rates. However Easterly, famous for a more communitarian approach, argues that this form of foreign aid actually hinders a countries capacity for domestic development, where locals find themselves at the mercy of foreign aid institutions who despite their best intentions, are often ill informed and lacking in accountability or oversight. Returning to the mosquito net example, Easterly claims " nets are often diverted to the black market . . . or wind up being used as fishing nets or wedding veils. Free nets don't get to the people who need them" (Easterly, 2006). While admittedly largely circumstantial evidence, this shows the lack of consideration that can be evident in cosmopolitan approaches, where one can be criticized for " suggesting that one can disregard the particularity of one's life in order to make decisions from an impartial point of view" (Toni Erskine), that is to say cosmopolitanism can be accused of being more focused on the inherent quality of actions as oppose to the consequences they may have. While this may be the most obvious fault in a cosmopolitan approach, there are also other aspects that tie in with this which cause debate, though perhaps not as severe problems as that discussed above. These include the very individualist nature of cosmopolitanism and thus its inability to analyze the role of community and its importance in societal

wellbeing as oppose to merely focusing all concern on the individual. And while not necessarily a critique, another key question raised by cosmopolitanism is the question of when you are and aren't required to take action, that is do factors such as capacity to help and responsibility of causation affect one's moral obligations to others.

Opposed to this, and largely in favor of the proposed statement, are the views of communitarians. Defined as those " who take communities, groups, and societies as the key to understanding moral action" (E Adler, 2005), those in favor of it argue it is a more considered approach to ethics in international relations, due to its capacity to engage with the nuances of a situation. Proponents also assert its capacity to encourage diversity, partially through the cultivation of autonomy and self-governance. Returning to the question of one's ethical obligations to others, communitarians emphasize the need to help within one's own community but contend that this doesn't extend beyond these boundaries as it would be pointless, if not detrimental, to do so. They place significant value on the beliefs and practices of a community but only within that specific communities' context, and thus it would be illogical to attempt to regulate other's behaviors by the same standards within a different context. The moral hegemony perpetuated by cosmopolitans is viewed as fundamentally flawed due to its central notion being an attempt to assign objectivity to morality, an inherently contextual subject. Selznick argues this to be an illogical endeavor as he states morality is "…grounded in the experience and ethos of a particular culture" (1987). To again quote Adler, " justice is possible only within the boundaries of a

differentiated community" (2005), furthering this notion that morality can only be viewed through the lens of a particular community.

However, as mentioned earlier, there are flaws in both sides and thus some level of compromise is realistically the most viable perspective. Communitarianism may once have been a viable view on the role of ethics in international relations, however due to the increasing level of connection globally and thus an increasing difficulty of avoiding impacting the lives of people outside of your sphere of day to day interactions, it no longer holds to closer scrutiny. We live in an age of global issues such as climate change, where one's actions have repercussions across the world, and thus while the notion of global citizenship may not be a viable one, one must have some level of global responsibility due to the global effects of our actions. To attempt to reconcile these diametrically opposed outlooks, it is important to first draw a distinction. As stated by Erskine, there exists both political and ethical cosmopolitanism, the latter defined as " a global sphere of equal moral standing" (Erskine, 2008) where the former represents a stance inclined towards the abolition of state borders, and thus some form of global citizenship. Perhaps drawing from ethical cosmopolitanism within a largely communitarian framework, one can adjust the statement regarding global citizenship to read not as an ethical duty to fellow national citizens, but rather an ethical duty to those whom one's actions affect. While this may not capture the entirety of the moral egalitarianism proposed by ethical cosmopolitanism, it feels both more sustainable and perhaps more intuitive, to say all those you effect deserve equal moral consideration.

However, this compromise still fails to account for some of the shortcomings of communitarianism, namely the question of generational accountability, particularly in relation to colonial reparations. To account for this one must understand the individual's connection to the morals and actions of one's community, and thus a certain responsibility to act to rectify any wrongdoing previously committed under the guise of those morals. Perhaps in a more egalitarian world this concession would not be necessary but due to the vast gaps in distribution of wealth and general inequality, any comprehensive ethical theory needs to address the historical factors that have led to the current state of affairs. Through this adjustment, the individual has the obligation to rectify the wrongdoing of those one is generationally and culturally connected to, particularly if this has led to their furthered prosperity at the expense of others. Another more difficult to resolve issue lies in the nature of defining what is deemed as having an effect on others. From a practical point of view, it is nearly impossible to precisely trace the repercussions of one's actions to their furthest implications, and any attempt to constrict this search would feel somewhat arbitrary as to where to ' draw the line'. Perhaps the simplest mean to reconcile this issue would be to define a difference between the moral obligation created by direct and indirect actions. If the product of one's actions directly negatively affects others, then you undoubtedly have an obligation to rectify this. However, if your actions are only indirectly causing negative affect, then your moral obligation is dependent on one's capacity to help and to do so without any detriment to the wellbeing of one's self or community. If product of actions directly effects other you have obligation to help, if effect is indirect but you

have capacity to help without detriment to own citizens, you have a moral obligation to help.

There is no practical form of global citizenship as it is proposed from a cosmopolitan perspective, however drawing in some elements of this rational can lead to a more viable standpoint of global responsibility within a communitarian framework and an emphasis on the effects of one's actions and the resulting moral obligations. By itself, cosmopolitanism represents a heavy-handed approach to the question of ethics within international relations as it fails to encapsulate the contextual factors that affect the reality of one's duties to others and how these should be carried out. Converse to this, communitarianism offers a stronger foundation which addresses these flaws with an approach that is centered around autonomy and self-governance of groups that acknowledges and promotes cultural differences that need to be accounted for. This perspective however is not entirely sufficient as the globalized nature of the world has brought upon an age of unprecedented interconnectivity that necessitates adjustments the traditional communitarian view. Factors such as causation and capacity to act must be brought in for a more comprehensive ethical approach that is also equipped to deal with issues such as generational impact.