

A practical challenge  
to cosmopolitan  
universalism  
philosophy essay



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Universalism is the position that moral values applies universally regardless of culture, religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender or sexuality.

Universalism is popular position. It can be found in as diverse schools of thought as the Stoics, Christianity, human rights proponents and utilitarian theorists. In this paper, I will use cosmopolitanism as an illustration of universalism. The cosmo-politan outlook is that justice ought to be implemented on a global scale regardless of national borders and cultural and ethnic affiliations. In my opinion, cosmopolitanism is the most coherent formulation of universalism regarding moral values and, thus, it deserves special attention.

For the purpose of this introduction, it might be enlightening to contrast cosmopolitan universalism with relativism about moral values. While universalism holds that there exists some universal moral values, which are applicable in every culture, relativism claims that morality is culturally determined. Likewise, when cosmopolitanism maintain that we have the same duties towards all people, whether they be born on the other side of the globe or in our home city, relativism in contrast argue that we have different duties towards different people solely because of their cultural, social, national or local attachment to us.

I do not kid myself that I will be able to adequately address every interesting aspect of abovementioned debate. Instead, I will strive to analyze the underlying assumptions of cosmopolitanism, namely that moral values are universal, and investigate and discuss whether this universalism is compatible with how humans actually think about each other and moral

values. My hypothesis is that this exploration might constitute a practical challenge for cosmopolitan universalism.

I am aware that this pragmatic and experimental approach is not the traditional modus operandi of philosophy. However, I believe that it is an unfortunate tendency that moral and political philosophy often omits empirical considerations about moral and social psychology. I will not elaborate on this tendency – the paper's scope is not infinite – so for the argument's sake, I hope that everyone is willing to assume that there is some value to actual empirical assessments about morality.

### **Universalism: the stuff of cosmopolitanism**

Cosmopolitanism is, as hinted, the theory that there exist universally valid moral principles that ought to dictate our moral duties even across borders and group affiliations. To be more specific, Thomas Pogge (1992) has argued that cosmopolitanism possesses three constitutive elements. He explains:

Three elements are shared by all cosmopolitan positions. First, individualism: the ultimate units of concern are human beings, or persons – rather than, say, family lines, tribes, ethnic, cultural, or religious communities, nations, or states. The latter may be units of concern only indirectly, in virtue of their individual members or citizens. Second, universality: the status of ultimate unit of concern attaches to every living human being equally – not merely to some subset, such as men, aristocrats, Aryans, whites, or Muslims. Third, generality, this status has global force. Persons are ultimate units of concern for everyone – not only for their compatriots, fellow religionists, or such like.

(Pogge 1992: 48-49)

Simon Caney agrees with this definition, though he calls the three elements “ the worth of individuals, equality, and the existence of obligations binding on all” (Caney 2005: 4). He summarizes cosmopolitanism as the view that “ all persons are of equal moral worth and everyone has duties to other human beings” (Caney 2005: 5). Even though all cosmopolitan moral theories share these elements, the specifics of the theories vary greatly. Some might believe that a teleological approach is to be preferred (most rigorously suggested by Singer 1972), while others defend cosmopolitanism from a deontological viewpoint (most famously by Kant). However, as this paper will primarily focus on the claims about generality and the existence of obligations binding all, I will therefore not waste precious space detailing these differences. I will, instead, focus on the claim that we should embrace the view of a single, global community in which moral duties and demands transcend the boundaries of social, national and local groups.

Caney makes (at least) four important assertions about this cosmopolitan version of universalism. The cosmopolitan universalism, Caney notes, implies universalism of scope; that not every value is universal; that there is an overlapping consensus on some values; and that these values are applicable only in certain situations. By universalism of scope, Caney simply means that the content of the universal values apply to everyone in the world regardless of whether they are universally accepted. This is the basic element of universal nature of cosmopolitanism. However, as stated in the second assertion, not every value is universal. Cosmopolitan universalism accepts some differences in moral values from culture to culture. Cosmopolitan universalism, as suggested in the third assertion, even allows different

cultural justifications of the universal values as long as they constitute an overlapping consensus. And finally, cosmopolitan universalism asserts that similar actions based on the universal values might actually be right in some situations and wrong in others because of different expectations or conditions. I believe that this is a sound and coherent version of universalism.

Caney suggests one compelling conceptual argument for the universal element of cosmopolitanism. It can be stated as the following:

(P1) There are valid moral principles.

(P2) Moral principles that apply to some persons apply to all persons who share some common morally properties.

(P3) Persons throughout the world share some morally relevant similarities.

(C) There are some moral principles with universal form and universal scope.

(P1) asserts that moral skepticism is wrong. Caney finds this claim uncontroversial<sup>[1]</sup> and moves on to (P2), which according to Caney is even less controversial because it is merely a truism. The contentious premise is thus (P3), which holds that people around the world hold some properties in common. Caney argues that all humans share the same needs and vulnerabilities such as we require food, water, shelter, rest, companionship, security and respect to live and function. Furthermore, there might also be some universal goods such as life, bodily health, friendship, play and so forth that we all strive for. Either way, Caney finds it plausible that we share some common properties that are morally relevant. Therefore, Caney believes that <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-challenge-to-cosmopolitan-universalism-philosophy-essay/>

(C) can be inferred and universalism as understood in cosmopolitanism is established.

Caney also delivers six conceptual counterarguments against this cosmopolitan universalism. I have shuffled the order a bit but the arguments can be stated as the following:

Universalism is flawed because it is committed to the idea of a human nature.

Universalism is false to the experience of moral reflection.

Universalism is impossible because moral argument takes place within historical traditions.

Universalism is proved wrong because of widespread moral disagreement.

Universalism is too abstract.

Universalism is unable to provide an account of moral motivation.

(1) holds that there is no clear human nature shared by everyone and, thus, it is wrong to suggest that we all share some morally relevant similarities.

Caney rejects this counterargument because it confuses commonality with identity. The view of communality holds a few properties in common, such as the capacity to feel pain, while identity delivers a detailed and throughout account of what it is to be human. Universalism is, of course, about communality but not identity.

(2) advances that universalism is wrong because it implies that moral reasoning is about discovering or inventing moral values. But in actuality, we interpret the appropriate moral values from our social practices. When we reason about morality, we do not believe that we discover or invent and follow universal principles. Rather, we believe that we try to observe and obey to the shared values of our specific culture. However, this does not ring true with our experiences regarding moral reasoning. We do not argue that slavery or rape is wrong because of the specific consensus in our culture but because we sincerely believe that slavery or rape is universally wrong.

(3) claims that we all look at moral dilemmas from our own unique and specific point of view in history and society, and, thus, the universal view that equates everyone everywhere is impossible. However, even though we might be influenced by our societal position and our historical traditions, this does not mean that universalism is wrong. Universalism does not presuppose that we view moral dilemmas outside history or culture. Universalism only needs (P1)-(P3).

(4) proposes that the extensive disagreement between cultures invalidates universalism. Even one of the most basic moral values - that everyone should be treated equally - can be unanimously agreed upon. But a lot of the supposed disagreement is not really disagreements. Even though there are many culturally and religiously different rationalizations, there is also a lot of convergence and overlapping consensus on moral values such as it is wrong to kill innocent people and steal. Moreover, the mere fact disagreements do not really refute universalism and support relativism. It is conceivable for

there to be widespread disagreement about questions with an objective and <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-challenge-to-cosmopolitan-universalism-philosophy-essay/>

correct answer. For instance, many people did not believe that the Earth was flat. However, the simple fact of this disagreement does not mean the shape of the Earth was a relative matter.

(5) argues that universalism is too abstract to have practical relevance in the real world. Moral values should be formulated with acute regard to the specific historical, economic and social contexts in which humans live. For instance, cosmopolitanism might encourage democracy but democracy is only a viable option under certain socio-economic and cultural conditions. Universalism does not take this into account. On the contrary, cosmopolitan universalism is rather explicit about it being universal in scope and jurisdiction. However, Caney believes that this objection is flawed *inter alia* because it does not disprove universal principles, it just “ shows that they should be combined with a proper recognition of historical and social circumstances” (Caney 2005: 40). Furthermore, while democracy might be conditional to certain historical circumstances, not every moral principle is limited in this manner. Take the opposition to murder, for instance. This opposition is not as dependent on historical specifics.

(6) posits that universalism fails to motivate human beings. This objection maintains that moral principles apply to people only if they can motivate them but that universal moral principles fail to do just that. Only culturally specific principles can do this and only criticism that draws on local understandings can have an effect. Caney replies that universal principles might actually resonate with some people and even if they do not and no one is inspired to action by them, this does not invalidate them. He



concludes that “ even if political philosophy does not induce any change, it is relevant” (Caney 2005: 42).

Caney believes that his argument for universalism and his treatment of the six counterarguments show that cosmopolitan universalism is a plausible and defensible position. I will not go into detail with the elements of Caney’s cosmopolitanism. As mentioned, I am more interested in the universal aspect of every cosmopolitan theory than the exact recommendations.

## **Ought implies can**

One of the main opponents of cosmopolitan universalism is communitarianism. Where cosmopolitan universalism insists that its moral principles as universally true, communitarians argue that the standards of justice depends on the particular societies and vary from context to context. I will not delve into the finer aspects of communitarianism, which is a wildly diverse theory in itself; however, I would like to introduce what I call the philosophical anthropology of communitarianism.

The philosophical anthropology of communitarianism is its general account of what it means to be a human amid other humans. Basically, communitarianism holds that we see of ourselves “ as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic” (Sandel 1984: 90). In other words, we are constituted by our actual commitments and attachments, and cosmopolitan universalism neglects this important fact:

To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments such as these is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person  
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wholly without character, without moral depth. For to have character is to know that I move in a history I neither summon nor command, which carries consequences nonetheless for my choices and conduct. It draws me closer to some and more distant from others; it makes some aims more appropriate, others less so. (Sandel 1984: 90-91)

The point of this swift change of scene is not that I want to defend the communitarian belief that we owe some sort of loyalty to our nation because our identity is tied to our nation. I simply want to note the philosophical anthropology of communitarianism. That is to say, I actually appreciate the cosmopolitans' arguments, yet I believe that they might be guilty of overlooking an important detail that the communitarians in a roundabout way pick up on: Our nature as human beings. The point is that cosmopolitans are very casual when portraying their moral theories' compatibility with our actual dispositions and temperament as humans.

In other words, cosmopolitan universalism seems to neglect the important fact that 'ought' implies 'can'. I think that we only ought to do something if we can actually do it. It is silly to demand that we prevent crimes being done on the other side of the world right in this moment since it is not a realistic demand. Similarly, I would argue that a moral theory that orders extreme acts of altruism such as sacrificing the life of yourself and your family for the benefit of a handful of strangers is not making realistic demands. History and psychology show that it is simply not within the capabilities of ordinary humans to do something like that. Of course, the demands of cosmopolitanism are not quite as ludicrous. But I still believe that it is a worthwhile endeavor to examine if the 'oughts' of cosmopolitanism are <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-challenge-to-cosmopolitan-universalism-philosophy-essay/>

easily or strenuously achieved. This argument obviously mirrors Caney's counterargument (6) but instead of being speculative, my analysis is concerned with facts.

To reiterate, I will in the following sections explore how the demands of cosmopolitanism correspond with our nature as humans. My aim is to investigate if there is a mismatch between our cognitive faculties and the demands of cosmopolitanism. As a parallel, it is obvious that humans are limited when it comes to raw data processing. We cannot multiply twenty-digit numbers in our heads and it would be inappropriate to demand that we do. Likewise, my objective is to investigate if we are fundamentally limited when it comes to reasoning about and acting on the universal decrees of cosmopolitanism. One can say, while Caney contends that humans have common needs and seek common goods, I want to examine if we also have common deficiencies.

## **What's the deal with humans?**

Humans are amazingly complex. Even the most unexceptional undertaking such as writing this very word is the result of computational brain activity and motoric movement way beyond the scope of other animals and present-day artificial intelligence. Consequently, I will not even dare to outline the fine characteristics of the human nature and the accompanying spectrum of societies. It is a mammoth task that would definitely be a step too far away from the subject of this paper. Instead, I will focus on the parts that are relevant for this paper. This means that I will try to explain the processes and emotions that govern group behavior. I have chosen group behavior for the simple reason that the cosmopolitan universalism leads to the view of a <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-challenge-to-cosmopolitan-universalism-philosophy-essay/>

global moral community in which social, national and local affiliations are morally insignificant; in other words, a world which orders significantly less or maybe even none discriminatory and prejudiced group behavior.

Before I move on, it is probably a good idea to define groups and group behavior. I follow Henri Tajfel (1982) in the following characterizations.

Firstly, a collection of individuals must fulfill two criteria to be a group: an external criterion and an internal criterion. The external criterion simply stipulates that there must be some consensus amongst nonmembers that the group exists. Usually, this external acknowledgment results in naming and labeling the group such as “ Danes,” “ liberals” or “ students.” In return, the internal criterion demands that the members of the group identifies with the group. That means that they must be aware of their membership, they must place some evaluative value on their membership and they must have an emotional investment in this awareness and evaluation. So, it is only when these two criteria are satisfied that it is possible to talk about groups.

Secondly, group behavior is about how and why individuals simplify their impressions of other individuals to form ideas of ingroups and outgroups and how they act upon these ideas in relation to these groups. In other words, it is about both prejudice and discrimination. Group behavior is not to be confused with group action, which is when a lot of individuals coordinate and take action in order to achieve a shared goal. In contrast, group behavior is usually uncoordinated and the individuals might not act upon shared goals. Obviously, this means that group behavior is not studied and explained on a

collective level. The study of group behavior is social psychology, not sociology.

So, just how common is group behavior amongst humans? The short answer is very common. An overwhelming and comprehensive body of research shows that humans tend to have very strong group biases. We simply favor members of our own group and discriminate against members of other groups.

Our ingroup bias is so deep-rooted that we even act upon them when we are assigned to random and meaningless groups. The most famous demonstration of this is the Minimal Group Paradigm study (Tajfel et al. 1971). In this experiment, 64 teenage boys from the same school were divided in two groups and told that they participated in a study of visual judgments. They were then shown a varying number of dots and asked to estimate how many dots there were shown. The first group of boys was told that people have an innate tendency to either overestimate or underestimate the number of the dots but that neither of these tendencies was related to accuracy, while the other group was told that some people are simply more accurate than other. After the boys had estimated the amount of dots shown, the boys were asked to help with another experiment about monetary decisions. For the ease of this other experiment, they were told that they had been grouped on the basis of the visual judgments that they had just made. In reality, the two groups of boys were randomly split up between “underestimators” and “overestimators” and “better accuracy” and “worse accuracy”. The boys were then told that in the new experiment their task would be to assign real money to the other boys, but that they

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wouldn't know who exactly they were rewarding or penalizing, just that they didn't have to worry about rewarding or penalizing themselves. So, the boys were handed forms that they had to fill out where some of the boxes read "these are rewards and penalties for member no. \_ of your group" or "these are rewards and penalties for member no. \_ of the other group." Tajfel (1970) considers the results "striking" and "at a very high level of statistical significance." (Tajfel 1970: 101): A large majority of the boys - regardless of whether they were "underestimators" or "overestimators" or have "better accuracy" or "worse accuracy" - gave significantly more money to members of their own group than to members of the other group. Despite the fact that a lot of the boys were close friends, despite the fact that their own monetary rewards were not affected by their choices and despite the fact that the amount of money was not inconsequential. Tajfel concludes:

Inasmuch as they could not know who was in their group and who was in the other group, they could have adopted either of two reasonable strategies. They could have chosen the maximum-joint-profit point of the matrices, which would mean that the boys as a total group would get the most money out of the experimenters, or they could choose the point of maximum fairness [which would mean that the boys gave everyone the same amount]. Indeed, they did tend to choose the second alternative when their choices did not involve a distinction between ingroup and outgroup. As soon as this differentiation was involved, however, they discriminated in favor of the ingroup. (Tajfel 1970: 101)

This experiment is not a one-off. Other experiments have shown exactly the same. Marilyn Brewer (1979) has reviewed the earliest of these  
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experiments, while Elliot Aronson et al. (2009) have discussed later experiments. The consensus seems to be that even when we are not involved in any conflicts of interest and have no past history of attitudes of intergroup hostility, we are susceptible to discriminating behavior. This holds true even when we have absolutely nothing to gain from favoring our group. The only thing needed to achieve discrimination is minimally salient groups. Even if these groups are completely randomly made and irrelevant to the decision at hand.

Furthermore, this tendency to discriminate is complemented by a tendency to hold intergroup prejudices. We believe that ingroups and outgroups are more homogeneous than they really are and we overvalue the ingroup and devalue the outgroup. Susan Fiske (2008) has gathered a lot of research on the subject. I will only turn my attention to one of these studies (Rabbie & Wilkens 1971). In this study, 72 male subjects were randomly divided into groups of three and paired with another group. Then the paired groups were led to expect to engage in an interactive task either in competition with the other group or independent of the other group. Both prior to the interaction phase and after the interaction phase, the men were asked to rate the ingroup and outgroup members on six traits. Before interaction, the men showed significant bias in the difference between ingroup and outgroup ratings. Following interaction, whether the task was performed in competition or independently of the other group, the degree of bias in favor of ingroup members increased significantly. Thus, not only do the minimal group demarcations produce prejudices but the effect of actual interaction

enhances favoritism toward ingroup members even when there is no competition.

## **Why we do as we do**

It is safe to say that group behavior significantly shapes human behavior: The tendency to form ingroups and distinguish them from outgroups is one of the most well-established facts of social psychology. However, it is one thing to document this behavior but it is something completely else to explain it. It is no surprise, then, that there are as many different explanations as there are psychologists trying to explain the behavior.

It seems reasonable to try and explain our group behavior by the role it plays in our actual and everyday social life. Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1986) have done just that. Their hypothesis is called the Social Identity Theory. It stipulates that being a member of a group gives a sense of identity and self-esteem. When we see ourselves as part of a group, we give ourselves a sense of belonging in the social world and that better our self-image. As one might expect, we then try to increase our self-esteem by enhancing the status of our group and by discriminating and holding prejudiced views against other groups. Fans of different sports teams are good examples of this. They faithfully follow and enthusiastically cheer for their own team while sincerely loathing the rival teams. And it is all done because they want to feel a sense of belonging and boost their self-esteem.

Another possible explanation is the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory by Brewer (1991). This theory states that we want to attain an optimal balance between the need to belong and the need to feel distinct and unique. Groups



can simultaneously fulfill these two needs. We can feel that we belong to a group but nevertheless feel distinct from the other groups in our environment.

Other functions of group behavior and group bias have also been suggested, for instance self-insight and ingroup cooperation (Aharpour & Brown 2002), uncertainty reduction (Hogg 2000) and social interaction (Deaux et al. 1999). All of these explanations share the observable notion that groups play an important role in constructing our identity.

There is a lot of truth to be found in these explanations. But the task of this paper is to figure out if we are so fundamentally limited in our reasoning and behavior that cosmopolitan universalism is unrealistic. Thus, I have to answer the question that goes is this behavior innate?

I believe that it is both useful and possible - with a bit of ingenuity and elbow grease - to divide the answers to this question along the lines of the debate over whether nature or nurture molds human character and behavior. In other words, some emphasizes the effect of our social environment and human malleability, while other accentuates our evolutionary past and instinctive nature.

The extreme proponents of the first school of thought contend that humans are incredibly malleable and receptive to our social surroundings and that almost none of our behavior is inborn. They believe that children like candy because parents use candy as a reward for eating vegetables. They argue that teenagers are inspired to compete in looks and fashion from getting grades at an early age and participating in spelling bees. They claim that <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-challenge-to-cosmopolitan-universalism-philosophy-essay/>

boys are aggressive and fight with each other because they are given weapons as toys. And they assert that group biases are the product of an education and upbringing that exacerbates racial, ethnic, national, political and gender-specific differences instead of reducing them. The most clear-cut statement of this belief probably belongs to the famous anthropologist Ashley Montagu who wrote: " Man is man because he has no instincts, because everything he is and has become he has learned, acquired, from his culture, from the man-made part of the environment, from other human beings" (Montagu 1973: 9).[2]This belief that humans are supremely malleable can be traced back throughout human history. The most famous supporter of the view is Karl Marx who argued that the modes of production dictate the social life and that " it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1859). Of course, the consequence of this view is that any statement about our natural capacity for language, our instinctive love of family or our innate tendency to group behavior is fundamentally erroneous. This would be great for cosmopolitan universalism because implementing cosmopolitanism - both morally and politically - would then only be a question of restructuring the social and political worlds in a way that eliminates group biases.

However, the idea of extreme malleability flies in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence that clearly suggest that there exist some innate behavioral tendencies (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby 1992). To be fair, none of the aforementioned psychologists who tried to explain group behavior by its social function would probably challenge this objection to the extreme

nurture position. They all accept that our evolutionary past have greatly influenced the human mind. Thus, the question I should really try to answer can be reformulated to how innate is our group behavior?

This question leads to the second school of thought that holds that a significant amount of our behavior can be explained by evolutionary psychology and behavioral genetics. The extreme proponents of this thought argue that they have found specific genes which greatly affect IQ levels, personality, antisocial behavior and sexual orientation. They have even found genes that increase the chances of having certain preferences for arm folding and hand clasping. They also believe that group behavior stems from actual genetic differences between groups. This theory is called the Genetic Similarity Theory (Rushton 1989, 2005). The theory postulates two things: Firstly, it hypothesizes that we tend to be more helpful and kind to those who are genetically similar to ourselves and that we tend to be more hostile to those who are less genetically similar. This is a relatively uncontroversial hypothesis that on a surface level resembles the idea of kin selection. Secondly, The Genetic Similarity claims that the members of an ethnic group to some degree are genetically similar. We simply share more genes with people in our ethnic group than people from different ethnic groups. The supporters of this theory point towards research which show that a grandfather has about the same genetic overlap with his grandchild in contrast to a random person from his ethnic group as a random person has with another person taken from within his ethnic group compared to a person from outside his ethnic group (Salter 2006). Therefore, ethnic groups are comparable to very large extended families. So, group biases are a

spillover product of our innate tendency to favor our own ethnic group and group behavior is not so much about social identity as it is about spreading our genes. Kevin MacDonald concludes:

This in turn suggests a genetic basis for xenophobia independent of the theory of groups - that the liking and disliking of others facilitated by this system is independent of whether the other is a member of a socially designated (culturally constructed) ingroup or outgroup. (MacDonald 2001: 68)

The Genetic Similarity Theory does not bode well for cosmopolitan universalism. If it is true, cosmopolitan universalism is not just difficult but directly against our natural tendency to spread our genes by furthering our own ethnic group. However, the Genetic Similarity Theory and the extreme proponents of the innateness might have went a bridge (or ten) too far when determining how innate our group behavior is. Bluntly put, ethnicity is not genetic category. Humans are actually a remarkably uniform species. The chimpanzee subspecies living just in Western Africa have higher levels of diversity than humans (Ebersberger et al. 2002). Besides a very small fraction of genes influencing visible physical features, there is no evidence to suggest that there is a distinct biological basis for different ethnic groups (or races, for that matter).[3]So even though there might be many locally differentiated ethn