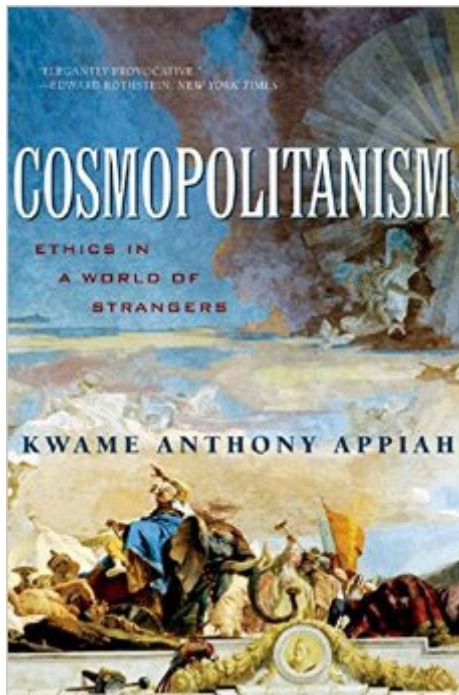


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Cosmopolitanism: Ethics In A World Of Strangers (Issues Of Our Time)



Synopsis

“A brilliant and humane philosophy for our confused age.” —Samantha Power, author of *A Problem from Hell* Drawing on a broad range of disciplines, including history, literature, and philosophy—as well as the author’s own experience of life on three continents—*Cosmopolitanism* is a moral manifesto for a planet we share with more than six billion strangers.

Book Information

Series: Issues of Our Time

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (February 17, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9780393329339

ISBN-13: 978-0393329339

ASIN: 039332933X

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (56 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #16,054 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #26 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Globalization #26 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Political #69 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Ethics & Morality

Customer Reviews

One of the most pernicious ideas has sprung from the myth that we are necessarily separated and segregated into groups that are defined by criteria like gender, language, race, religion or some other kind of boundary. And it is easy to see that these boundaries are a major cause of conflict. The author of this enthralling book - Kwame Anthony Appiah - challenges this kind of separative thinking by resurrecting the ancient philosophy of "cosmopolitanism." This school of thought dates back almost 2500 years to the Cynics of Ancient Greece. They first articulated the cosmopolitan ideal that all human beings were citizens of the world. Later on, these ideas were elaborated by another group of philosophers: the Stoics. According to Appiah, the influence of cosmopolitanism has stretched down the ages and through to the Enlightenment. He takes Immanuel Kant's notion of a League of Nations and the Declaration of the Rights of Man to be two manifestations of this ancient

idea. Appiah sees cosmopolitanism as a dynamic concept based on two fundamental ideas. First is the idea that we have responsibilities to others that are beyond those based on kinship or citizenship. Second is something often forgotten: just because other people have different customs and beliefs from ours, they will likely still have meaning and value. We may not agree with someone else, but mutual understanding should be a first goal. The book is full of personal experiences. I doubt that anyone else could have written it: His mother was an English author and daughter of the statesman Sir Stafford Cripps, and his father a Ghanaian barrister and politician, who reminded his children to remember that they were "citizens of the world."

There is, so far, no better or more mature book on moral cosmopolitanism than Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. In it, Appiah makes plain, by well-crafted appeals to the reader's good sense that are replete with ethnographic examples and real-world insights, what romantics and theologians have been telling us for ages: There is but a hair's breadth of difference between us; a tiny space that we can fill with causes for consternation and hatred, or with salutary joy at considering that difference. This Appiah does without in any way suggesting that there can ever be an end to the moral and cultural tensions that those differences do and must invite. He sketches the tenable cosmopolitanism we have been waiting for, and he parts company with the sentimentalist versions that remain - and should remain - in the shallow end of the pool. Appiah, here as elsewhere (*The Ethics of Identity*), marvels that so many intellectuals have distorted the truth about the key insights of cosmopolitans, and he takes them to task. These have argued that cosmopolitanism contains an incredible and/or dangerous set of normative proposals and disregards the "facts" of human nature (that we are an insular species, with a territoriality that is red in tooth and claw). Appiah deftly replies that it is the cultural conservative, the jejune jingoist or nationalist, the duped hyper-contextualist, whose view of the world and of human nature is distorted, for the history of human social, cultural and even sexual intercourse is replete with cross-pollinations of language, religion, art, dress, rites, metaphysical outlooks, and progeny, all bespeaking an enormous aptitude for cooperation, bonding and friendship.

Appiah has written an intelligent, urbane, and concise analysis of, and prescription for, the global world we have come to inhabit. His title "Cosmopolitan" is intended to evoke its etymology, that we are "citizens of the world." Unlike Robert Wright in *"The Moral Animal,"* Appiah rejects a one-world government, insisting we need to maintain a pluralistic system of governments for the ostensible purpose of creative enhancements, e.g., changes to the existent models through new insights,

programs, and trial-and-error (hopefully, with errors corrected). This book tackles some of the ethical issues involved as the global perspective is taking shape. Most of his prescriptions are pragmatic (Chap. 4: "Primacy of Practice"), rather than doctrinaire, evidenced most clearly in his chapter on pluralistic cultures and how best to "manage" their differences (Chap. 8: "Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?"). He clearly disdains the positivist approach ("Escape from Positivism"), yet in spite of this disdain, he keeps to the empirical side of most questions (Chap. 3: "Evidence on the Ground"). Aristotlean common-sense is offered where it's needed. That we are all neighbors should by now be obvious (Chap. 5: "Imaginary Strangers" and *passim*), and while capitalism is accepted, not without its fetters. Islamic and Christian fundamentalism are reproofed appropriately (Chap. 9: "The Counter-Cosmopolitans"), while the Anglican-type of latitudinarianism is espoused (without the religious particulars). "Pluralism" is our global credo, to which I heartily reply, "Amen." I often wish we recognized it as our national credo as well. He forthrightly repudiates Singer's and Unger's utilitarian "moral calculi," and extols a person-centered ethic in their stead.

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