Chapter 7
Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is the view that the relevant ethical community is all of humanity. In this chapter, I will examine three somewhat different cosmopolitan theories: The pluralist theory of Thomas Pogge (2002), the social contract theory of Charles Beitz (1979 and 1999), and the utilitarian theory of Peter Singer (2004). All theories hold that humanity as a whole is the relevant ethical community for global ethics. All theories also hold that ethical principles are essentially principles for individuals.

Taking the individual as ethically primary may be what makes cosmopolitanism plausible. Human reality for these theorists is just individual human beings endowed with moral principles. But it is not an accidental fact that human beings live in society. Like ants, termites, lions and chimpanzees, they have evolved so that living in groups is not optional for them. The many benefits produced by social institutions, whether formal or informal, depend on our human ability to forgo self-interest in the interest of the relevant group. The group principles—ethical, political, economic—allowing us to do this are not optional either, especially those having to do with nations. So to begin with it seems that cosmopolitan theories may have too limited a view of human reality.

However, I will give these theories a chance. The main questions I will ask of each theory are: The rationale for basing ethics on individuals as members of the group all of humanity; and the plausibility of each theory as a basis for transnational ethics.

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In the Introduction to his World Poverty and Human Rights, Thomas Pogge presents a persuasive and emotionally compelling case that world poverty could be dramatically reduced at little cost to ourselves. It is worth summarizing his presentation of the nature and extent of world poverty. As of 2002, 2.8 billion people—46% of the world’s population—lived below the $2 a day line the World Bank uses to define poverty. Each year, 18 million people die prematurely from poverty-related causes, including 12 million children under the age of 5. Shifting about 1 per cent of the income of those in high income economies (about $312 billion per year) to those in poverty would, says Pogge, “eradicate poverty.” (Pogge 2002, 2-3)

However, Pogge recognizes that many of the inhabitants of the better-off countries don’t regard it as an ethical duty or obligation to help those in need in other countries. We certainly regard it as a good thing to do, but maybe not an ethical requirement. Pogge argues to the contrary, that ameliorating poverty is an ethical requirement. We don’t need some dramatic new transnational principle for this. The individual ethical principle of benevolence,¹ to help another when the cost to ourselves would not be great, could apply to this case. This principle can easily be justified on either utilitarian or universal principle grounds.² Unlike Rawls, who regards transnational ethics as a definite extension beyond domestic justice requiring new principles, Pogge argues that the ethical principles that apply within a society must also apply transnationally. Rather than special principles for a transnational context, Pogge appeals to a preexisting universal morality which grounds both domestic and transnational principles of justice.

Thus his ethical theory is not a social contract theory at all. (Pogge 2007, 41) It is grounded in what Rawls calls comprehensive beliefs, religious, philosophical, or moral beliefs which the participants in a just society know they disagree on. Thus for a social contract theory such beliefs cannot be the basis for principles of justice.³ They lie outside what can be required of us as a consequence of our being participants in a system of social cooperation. Thus, using the distinction made in Chapter 4, The Basis of Ethical Principles, his theory is a moral theory rather than an ethical theory.

Pogge’s analysis may provide grounds for adopting moral or ethical principles furthering the reduction of poverty in poor nations, perhaps even ethical requirements to do so. Perhaps one will give money to NGOs working to ameliorate poverty in poor nations, or even travel to those nations to help, or even adopt a child. But these will be personal moral requirements. Thus, when Pogge argues that we have a moral obligation to reduce poverty, the question is who exactly is the “we” being addressed? It is in the first instance individuals in the developed nations, meaning the US, Europe, Japan, and Australia, who share our moral beliefs. As we will see shortly, Pogge’s attempts to extend his conclusion to institutions have some serious drawbacks.

Pogge does think there is a universal criterion of justice which all persons can accept as grounds for judgements about the global order and international relations. (Pogge 2002, 33-34) He notes that it is “unfortunately rather complicated,” (44) thus making it what I call a pluralist theory of justice.⁴ And, as I noted in Chapter 5, a pluralist theory of justice should be adopted only if no theory based on a few prioritized principles is acceptable. Instead, Pogge insists that a theory of justice must deal with the particular relation of social institutions to human goods. This suggests a rather extreme version of pluralism: We cannot make ethical generalizations about how institutions are to function justly, but must depend on our moral intuitions.

His examples of cases which he claims more general theories of justice cannot handle seem to confirm this. He claims that most theories of just distribution (such as Rawls’ theory or utilitarianism) cannot