

Cosmopolitanism and the Internet

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When anyone asked him where he came from, he said, "I am a citizen of the world".
(Diogenes Laertius, Life of Diogenes the Cynic)

1 A General Outline of the Structure of the Argument

The argument in this paper comprises of four separate but interrelated theses:

1.1 The Epistemological Thesis

The Internet has made the dissemination of the widest variety and volume of information more global and that information more accessible to more people around the world than ever before.

However, that information doesn't always qualify as knowledge because it fails to meet one or more of the conditions of knowledge understood in the traditional sense as being "justified true belief". Thus information on the Internet, understood as mere data, can fail to qualify as knowledge because it may lack justification or because although in some way justified, it may not be true. Hence, information on the Internet can only be deemed knowledge if and only if it satisfies the three necessary conditions of knowledge, belief, justification, and truth.

Knowledge, however, though perhaps necessary, is not sufficient for wisdom. Let us understand "wisdom" as practical knowledge that enables one to lead a good, virtuous and ethical life. The Internet, at this stage of its development may provide one with knowledge but it is doubtful whether it can provide one with wisdom.

More than knowledge, Cosmopolitanism requires wisdom before it can become a practical possibility. Wisdom need not be understood as an absolute condition of either having it or not having it. I think we can allow degrees of wisdom, starting with a philosophical condition that sets one on the quest for wisdom, which is what philosophy actually means, the quest for wisdom, and culminating, if ever, to the state of being wise. Thus, as in Plato's *Symposium*, we can understand wisdom in the same way as Platonic love: a gradual philosophical ascend to knowledge of the Good.

1.2 The Metaphysical Thesis

The Internet is fast changing our notion of personal identity. Traditionally, personal identity is largely constituted and informed by one's national, religious, gender, racial and social characteristics. Let us collectively refer to these, as the communal

characteristics of one's personal identity. However, in effect each of us lives into two communities. The local community determined by our birth and upbringing and the global community determined by universal concerns of personal freedom and wellbeing. It is the global community that is fundamentally the source of our ethical obligations. For with respect to fundamental values such as justice, "we should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and local residents" (Nussbaum (1997, p. 52).

Communication on the Internet brackets off the communal characteristics of personal identity. Communication on the Internet becomes the communication of disembodied minds, free of the restrictions of all the physical and communal characteristics that can interfere with rational communication between people, at least potentially rational communication.

This disembodied communication of minds on the Internet is, to the extent that it is carried out rationally, in keeping with Stoicism's central precept that we are all equal with respect to moral worth. And we are all equal with respect to moral worth on the sole basis of our human capacity to reason. Thus communal characteristics become irrelevant to rational communication on the Internet.

Rational communication on a global scale requires, however, a common language. The English language as the contemporary lingua franca is such a language.

Thus, the Internet enables the global communication of minds beyond all the local boundaries of particular communities as characterised by race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and social status. This provides the ground for global communication on the basis of a common language that in turn renders Cosmopolitanism a practical possibility.

1.3 The Ethical Thesis

Cosmopolitanism is informed by the stoic belief that only the ethical life is worth pursuing. In Socrates' terms, the examined life is an ethical life. Stoic ethics is based on the central precept that as human beings we are worthy of moral respect and moral treatment on the sole basis of our common humanity, a fundamental feature of which is our common and inherent rationality. With regard to morality we are, according to the stoics, first and foremost citizens

of the World. As citizens of the World we should be concerned with the welfare of our fellow human beings not on the basis of our locally determined communal characteristics, which in any case are morally irrelevant, but rather on the basis of a global sense of justice that supports our collective human rights to which we are entitled by virtue of our cosmic citizenry.

1.4 The Empirical Thesis

Beginning with the transformation of the Ancient Greek city states into a world empire by Alexander the Great, the globalisation of the world, that has continued through successive military conquests and colonisations of the world by various Empires, has culminated in an economic colonisation of the world by multi-national corporations. This globalisation, first colonial and now economic, has unintentionally and paradoxically laid down the foundations of Cosmopolitanism, at least the foundations for its practical possibility.

Due to constraints of time I will not have time to explore all the four theses above. I will therefore focus primarily on the empirical and ethical theses that together lend some support, by no means conclusive, to my overall thesis that the Internet is providing and laying down the foundation for the practical possibility for Cosmopolitanism.

2 Introduction

My friend Luke was telling me recently about his current passion - playing backgammon on the Internet. His latest contest was with a Turk from Istanbul. At the end of the game Luke signed off with the words "Salam Alekum". The Turk's reply was "are you a Muslim?" to which Luke responded with "no, I am a Greek". This short e-mail exchange between a Greek in Sydney and a Turk in Istanbul got me thinking about the possible connection between the Internet and the stoic concept of Cosmopolitanism. For in the above real-life example, two individuals who are traditionally divided by sharp and often hostile boundaries of ethnicity, religion and politics, stretching back into history for at least 5 centuries, come together in way which was unimaginable prior to the advent of the Internet. Prior to the Internet the chances of these two individuals coming together to play backgammon would have been negligible. The Internet has provided the opportunity for people who are traditionally divided along political, religious and ethnic not to mention geographical boundaries, to make contact in spite of those boundaries - on the Internet those boundaries melt away. The only boundaries remaining in contemporary communication, are the personal prejudices and biases of the Internet users. These may prove much more difficult to overcome.

Prior to the ascent of Alexander the Great and his conquest of the world, from Greece to India, the world according to the ancient Greeks of the city-states was divided into two distinct groups: Greeks and Barbarians. Alexander's conquest first of the whole of Greece and then the rest of Asia was a primary cause for breaking down this distinction and opening-up the world, perhaps

for the first time, to the practical possibility of globalisation. Following on the heels of this early globalisation of the world under Alexander of Macedonia, was the foundation of the Hellenistic schools of philosophy and the rapid ascent to prominence and dominance of one of them, that of Stoicism. We need not speculate whether the globalisation of the world under Alexander, was a causal factor in rapid the ascent of Stoicism. We can say, however, that the globalising conditions initiated and established by Alexander's empire far from being inimical to Stoicism, were to prove conducive to its rapid growth and ascendancy. First in the Hellenistic and then in the Roman world following the fateful defeat of Cleopatra's and Mark Antony's armies by Ceasar at the battle of Actium. The extensive philosophical and political influence of Stoicism on the Roman Empire, are well documented. Seneca, Nero's counselor, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, as well as Cicero, who although more of an Academician than a Stoic was sympathetic to the stoic philosophy, are well known historical stoic personalities.

3 Old Globalisation to Early Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism, is a central belief of stoic philosophy. It is the belief that human beings, qua rational creatures, are all part of the One Rational Cosmos. In contrast to the earlier pre-Alexandrian Greeks, the city-state was the entire rational cosmos, a cosmos that the stoics identified with the whole of the natural world or Nature. Nature was for the stoics both rational and divine. According to the stoics, it was precisely the rationality and the order of the Universe that determined its divinity. This is an interesting philosophical point because even God, whom the stoics identified with Nature, is subject to the strict laws of reason and logic. Even God cannot do as he pleases. He too must follow the commands of reason, for as a matter of necessity, God as identical with the whole of Nature is supremely rational and benevolent. For everything that emanates from reason is also supremely good. As fellow-members of this rational and orderly cosmos, all human beings are brothers and sisters. They are all citizens of the one cosmos. In St Augustine's words, as human beings, we are all citizens of the "City of God". And as we saw for the stoics, God's City is the whole natural universe.

Globalisation may not be necessary for Cosmopolitanism but it certainly helps propagate its cause. Unfortunately both ancient and modern globalisation in the form of colonisation did not lead to cosmopolitanism. Quite the opposite in fact happened. Instead of providing us with the mutual confirmation of each other's rational and moral worth, it provided us with means of both irrational and immoral discrimination and exploitation that saw at one time or another the enslavement, both physical and mental, of large parts of the globe. Perhaps in theory the Romans supported Cosmopolitanism but in practice they acted with cruel determination to enforce a uniform despotism on all those over whom they ruled. The road of colonialism both ancient and modern was never going to be the path that led to true Cosmopolitanism. For a

necessary condition for Cosmopolitanism, best described in one of the formulations of Kant's Categorical Imperative, namely, 'treating every human being always as an end and never merely as a means', was missing from its foundations. Nor could it be logically or morally reconciled with its policy and practice of using people as means to its own self-centred ends. However, adopting the optimistic spirit of stoicism, one that I will adopt throughout this paper, colonialism may have made a positive contribution to the practical possibility of Cosmopolitanism. For to the extent that both ancient as well as modern colonialism helped propagate world languages such as Greek, Latin and English which in turn helped disseminate knowledge throughout the world, it made a positive if insufficient contribution to the practical possibility of Cosmopolitanism. Today the lingua franca of both the physical and electronic worlds, is English. This provides the means of mass communication across the world in a way that would not be possible in a world where people from different countries only spoke like the citizens of Babel many mutually incomprehensible languages. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that colonisation, although diametrically opposed to the stoic philosophy that underlies the concept of Cosmopolitanism, did nevertheless help to establish one of its essential conditions, namely, the widespread ability of people from different parts of the world to communicate with each other linguistically. Both the stoic Logos meaning Universal Reason and the Logos of the Christian Gospel which stands for God would not have been successfully transmitted without the logos of a common language made possible, as I have suggested, through the process of colonisation. In the modern world, it is the spread of the English language through British colonisation throughout the world and especially the United States, that perhaps provided the essential condition for a lingua franca and laid the ground for the practical possibility of Cosmopolitanism. For if my hypothesis is right, the Cosmic Logos or Cosmic Reason that inspires Cosmopolitanism is aided by a common logos or language.

4 New Globalisation to Neo-Cosmopolitanism

I have speculated above that although antithetical to Cosmopolitanism, colonialism both ancient and modern has advanced the cause of Cosmopolitanism by providing one of its essential practical features - namely, that of a universal common language. For if universal reason is to become the foundation of human relationships across the globe, it must be able to be expressed in a universal language, common to all people. The new globalisation as an issue addressed at recent World Economic Forums around the world, most recently in Melbourne, is a globalisation based on economic rationalism and free trade. A globalisation determined not by gunboat diplomacy but multinational corporate policy. Its opponents suggest that this is another form of world colonisation exercised through the money-market economy for the benefit of the rich. To the extent that these allegations are true, the new globalisation as envisaged by the corporate multi-nationals can be

perceived as another form of world colonisation, albeit an economic one. Formal slavery as practiced under the old colonialist regimes is now replaced with sweatshops in third world countries manufacturing consumer goods for the affluent citizens of the corporate world. Under this perception, Cosmopolitanism under the new globalisation becomes Consumeropolitanism. Not a universal brotherhood and sister-hood based on the equal moral worth and dignity of every person, but a conglomeration of self-interested individuals whose primary aim is the personal satisfaction of an insatiable consumption of consumer goods. In his recent book "the Global Soul", Pico Iyer refers to this new type of globalisation as 'cocacolonisation' - a globalisation in which companies become more important than countries. This image of the new globalisation is the one manifested pervasively by advertisements that continuously associate consumer products with human values and emotions, aspirations and ideals. Advertisements that associate friendship with a soft drink, family life with a hamburger, freedom with a car and independence with perfume. I will refer to this phenomenon as the consumerisation of values. As an ethical problem, e-commerce will exacerbate the problem. For the widespread consumerisation of human values through pervasive advertising that is increasingly becoming more proliferate through new mediums, such as the Internet, is an ethical problem. A problem that should perhaps metaphysically alert us to another potentially bigger ethical problem. The problem that I will here refer to as "the brandisation of personality". The phenomenon of individuals identifying themselves and each other through the medium of well known, because widely advertised, brands.

So what does this new economic globalisation betoken for the practical possibility of Cosmopolitanism? As in the case of its colonial predecessor, economic globalisation may at first appear antithetical to Cosmopolitanism. To the extent that it treats people primarily as consumers, it has in principle no interest in promoting Cosmopolitanism according to the stoic ideas of eudemonia (happiness), autarkeia (inner-freedom and self-reliance) and a simple lifestyle based on the pursuit of goodness. It sees people not as ends to be allowed to develop their full human capacities for their self-fulfillment and their own moral benefit but rather views them as economic units of consumption that provide the means for generating profits for large multinational corporations. Even if the market economy was interested in providing the essential conditions for people to flourish as self-fulfilling individuals, that interest would be primarily motivated by commercial and economic considerations. The rise of life-style consumption is something that has wide usage in both advertising and marketing strategies. Life-style itself becomes a saleable commodity to be acquired instantly through the purchase of more consumer goods. However, as in the case of colonial globalisation, contemporary economic globalisation, although seemingly antithetical to Cosmopolitanism, can nevertheless contribute to its practical possibility. It does so through rendering a wide and diverse corpus of information and knowledge on almost every subject accessible to millions of people

around the world. The proliferation of widely accessible information on the Internet, that people all over the world can exchange readily, is making the Internet the preferred medium of communication. It is paradoxical that the same medium used to promote and advance the new information economy and global e-commerce was used effectively by the S11 group to organise mass protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne recently. As in the case of colonial globalisation, economic globalisation is providing the means for advancing the practical possibility of Cosmopolitanism. It does so through providing a medium of information that can be used, at least potentially, in laying down the foundations of Cosmopolitanism. In establishing a global community based not on the principles of market economies but based on the principles of stoic philosophy.

5 Cosmopolitanism and the Internet

To better understand the potential relationship that may exist between Cosmopolitanism and the Internet, it is first necessary to outline some of the central features of stoic philosophy that relate to the concept of cosmopolitanism:

5.1 The life of virtue and the life of wisdom

The life of virtue is both necessary and sufficient for living a happy life. Essential to understanding this, is the distinction the stoics made between those things that are completely within our power and those things not completely within our power. According to the Stoic Epictetus,

Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions - in short, whatever is our doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or, that is, whatever is not our doing. So remember, if you think that things naturally enslaved are free or that things not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will blame both gods and men. (in Gill 1995)

The only thing over which we have control, according to the stoics, is our faculty of judgement. Since anything else, including all external affairs and circumstances are not within our power, we should adopt toward them an attitude of indifference. Again according to Epictetus,

What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about things. For example, death is nothing dreadful (or else it would have appeared so to Socrates), but instead the judgement about death is that it is dreadful, that is what is dreadful. (in Gill 1995)

To avoid unhappiness, frustration, and disappointment, we therefore need to do two things: control those things that are within our power (our beliefs, judgements, desires and attitudes) and be indifferent to those things which are not in our power (things external to us). As rational beings we should therefore perfect our characters through living a virtuous life because it is the only thing that can bring us both ataraxia (tranquillity) and

eudemonia (happiness). A happiness that is totally within our control because it depends on our own judgement which is entirely within our control. Associated with the idea of a virtuous life is the idea of wisdom. The ultimate object of philosophy according to the Stoics is to teach us not knowledge, but wisdom, understood as a way of living a virtuous life. Wisdom, therefore, understood in the stoic sense was a way of life that brought peace of mind (ataraxia), inner freedom (autarkeia), happiness (eudemonia) and a cosmic consciousness. By "cosmic consciousness", the stoics understood that quality, universal reason, by virtue of which we all are, qua human, integrated parts of the cosmos.

As the contemporary philosopher Pierre Hadot puts it,

The exercise of wisdom entails a cosmic dimension. Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world, and does not see the world qua world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the (stoic) sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has a feeling of belonging to a whole, which goes beyond the limits of his individuality. (1995, p. 273)

Most importantly, the stoics viewed philosophy as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind's anguish. For according to an Epicurean saying, "vain is the word of the philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man" (Epictetus, in Gill 1995).

5.2 Social and political engagement

Closely associated with the cosmic perspective in stoic philosophy is the communal perspective. That is, the concern for living in the service of human community, and for acting in accordance with social justice. Thus according to the stoics, philosophy entails a community engagement. This is something that the stoics have in common with Aristotle who saw philosophy as essentially, political. That is, concerned with the affairs of the polis. For the stoics, however, the polis was the cosmopolis, not the city-state but the whole cosmos.

Having briefly outlined the essential features of stoic philosophy relevant to the concept of cosmopolitanism, we can now begin to discern the potential relationship between Cosmopolitanism and the Internet. The cosmic dimension of the Internet, with its potential accessibility to every person around the world makes it a perfectly suitable medium for the dissemination of the precepts of Cosmopolitanism. This cosmic dimension of scope provides both Cosmopolitanism and the Internet as a mass medium of information and knowledge an initial common denominator. Add to that the community engagement that is common to both (significantly, not a local but a global community), and we have a common, albeit at present superficial, affinity between the two. In the case of the Internet, for example, the community engagement is effected through e-mail and chat rooms. Although there is a common denominator in the form of a cosmic dimension and a community engagement that underlies both Cosmopolitanism and the Internet, the latter by no means embodies the other essential stoic

features relevant to Cosmopolitanism. Significantly what is missing is the practice of wisdom understood not as a form of information but as a way of being in the world that requires one to live a life in accordance with virtue. More than information, wisdom requires transformation. More than epistemology, wisdom requires practical ethics, both, incidentally necessary for developing trust amongst users of the Internet. Some knowledge about the world, even abstract and theoretical knowledge is perhaps necessary for wisdom but it is not sufficient. I say perhaps, because if we are to believe Socrates' claim that he knew nothing, but accept that his was wise, then it would appear that knowledge, at least knowledge of facts, is not necessary for wisdom. To become wise one requires not only to be informed but more importantly to become transformed through the practice of philosophy as a way of life. Thus, the dissemination of philosophical knowledge on the Internet as a form of abstract knowledge is not enough. What is required for the connection between Cosmopolitanism and the Internet to become meaningful philosophically and a practical possibility and not just an interesting metaphor, is the creation, through the Internet, of a philosophical community committed to the practical application of the philosophical precepts associated with Cosmopolitanism. This is by no means an easy task and it may in fact prove practically impossible to bring about. Although in some sense utopian, the idea of reconciling the potential of the Internet as an effective medium of propagating the positive features of Cosmopolitanism remains in principle a practical possibility. One that is also desirable given the diminishing natural resources of the world and the constant threat to the natural environment through commercial exploitation to satisfy our insatiable desire for consumer goods. Add to this the constant outbreak of wars around the globe it becomes evident how the ethical lifestyle counselled by the stoics, with its emphasis on a simple, peaceful, and frugal way of living, that respects not only the ethical rights of all individuals as citizens of the world but also extends that respect to the whole of the natural environment, is ethically desirable.

Economic globalisation through multinational market forces that views people as individual consumers of the world instead as citizens of the world has so far failed to address the most pressing political and social problems of the world. Wars and poverty still ravish the planet. However, in keeping with the positive and optimistic message of stoicism, we have the opportunity offered to us through the medium of the Internet to create a global community of citizens who care about the ethical and spiritual development of the whole world. Perhaps this would occur not through some revolution, albeit a mental revolution, but rather through a Hegelian evolution of the Spirit that uses the Internet to propagate the precepts of Cosmopolitanism and manifest itself in the daily lives of all people across the world, thus creating historically the first Cosmopolis. A Cosmopolis of world citizens not of world consumers. A Cosmopolis that has evolved from ancient and modern colonisation, to linguistic and economic globalisation, to potentially a universal practical idea propagated through the most effective cosmic transmitter of ideas, that of the Internet. My stoic

optimism makes me believe that this is a distinct practical possibility.

6 Conclusion

I have suggested above that a necessary condition for Cosmopolitanism is the free global dissemination of ideas through a universal language. I have argued that both ancient and modern military colonisations as well the contemporary multi-national colonisation of the free market economy, have unintentionally established the ground for the potential realisation of Cosmopolitanism. They have done so, by establishing the conditions for a global universal language. It is also reasonable to assert that the English language, through its widespread usage in all parts of the world today, fulfills the role of a lingua franca.

Although the exponential explosion of information on the Internet may have resulted in greater factual knowledge, it has not brought about greater wisdom. As a means of aiding the increase of the consumption of commercial products, e-commerce, for instance, has established global consumerism, not Cosmopolitanism - a 'cosmopolitanism' of world consumers, not the Stoic Cosmopolitanism of World citizens. The standardisation of goods and services such as McDonalds and Coca-Cola, for example, may have established a kind of consumer 'cosmopolitanism' by allowing people from different parts of the World to share the same culinary experience of a Big Mac or the 'real thing'. However, this kind of consumer 'cosmopolitanism' is devoid of the ethical standards and ideals of stoic cosmopolitanism. For consumer globalisation neither supports nor encourages, in principle or in practice, the ethical precepts of Cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, to the extent that it leads to the exploitation of both people and the natural environment, it is antithetical to Cosmopolitanism. But as in the case of earlier colonisations, contemporary commercial colonisation or cocacolonisation, may unintentionally be laying the ground for the future establishment of Stoic Cosmopolitanism.

The Internet as a means of global communication that freely transcends geographical, political, religious and national boundaries, is well placed to establish, at least potentially, the foundations of Cosmopolitanism. It can do so through the global dissemination of stoic philosophy. In this regard, stoic philosophers around the World can potentially utilise the Internet as a powerful means of globally establishing stoic cyber communities that can in time evolve into the first World Cosmopolis in Cyberspace. Not a Cosmopolis based on the idea of some overarching World Government, but rather a global collective of individuals who relate to each other as equal citizens of the Cosmos. A citizen-collective not based on any one common political system or even a set of common social activities, but rather a loose association of world-citizens whose pursuit of their own independent goals and practices are based on mutual respect for each others' rights to freedom and well-being. Specifically, the right of every person to be treated as an end and never merely as a means. "The kingdom of ends" may be a utopian ideal but it is one that the Internet is making more

possible. The possibility will only be actualised not when philosophers become kings but when they succeed in making philosophy and stoic philosophy in particular globally known on the Internet. It is only then that Knowledge on the Internet can be transformed through the practice of stoic philosophy into global wisdom. A Greek and a Turk playing backgammon on the Internet have perhaps unwittingly established the beginnings of Cosmopolitanism. Time will tell.

7 References

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