

Transcending Cosmopolitanism

Mogobe Bernard Ramose

University of South Africa, South Africa

Diogenes
2014, Vol. 59(3–4) 30–35
Copyright © ICPHS 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192113493744
dio.sagepub.com


The term community is frequently used and variously defined in discussions about cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, the usage is to recognise the already existing community and, on the other, to express the desideratum to progress towards the realisation of a wider and perhaps even better community characterised by shared moral values. In some cases the discussion may be abstract. Yet, in other cases the discussion will move from the concrete existential conditions to the normative or abstract levels. We prefer the latter approach.

The assumption of community in many discussions of cosmopolitanism rests firmly on the ontological presupposition that being is the plenum of opposing entities. The opposing entities would tend towards either mutual aversion or attraction. In the latter case, they would culminate in a synthesis to endure for a while before reversion to the original state of opposition. In ancient Greek philosophy this ontology, taking motion as the principle of being, was pronounced by Heraclitus and reaffirmed refined by Hobbes (1962) and Hegel (1975) in Modern philosophy. The idea of mutual aversion or attraction suggests that in their original state entities are not necessarily related. They subsist independently of one another. Hence the desideratum to move towards each other for the construction of synthesis. Movement in this direction does not explain much about the continued life of the entity moving away from the others. That is, how does the being in the state of aversion survive at all? If the aversive being moves only towards its prey for its survival, surely such movement illustrates and establishes a relationship between itself and its prey. It follows then that the claim that in their original state beings are not necessarily related is rather tenuous and problematical. In order to avoid this rather untenable and problematical claim, we prefer the ontological point of departure that recognises motion as the principle of *'be-ing'* and conceives of beings as originally interrelated albeit to different degrees.

According to our preferred ontological perspective, the boundary is not the point of the exclusion of 'the other'. Instead, it is contemporaneously the moment of the reaffirmation of the 'I' and the coupling point of 'the other' and the 'I'. The boundary then underlines the originary relationship of complementarity subsisting between the 'I' and 'the other'. In this way, *'be-ing'* constitutes boundary as the recognition of the ineradicable network of complex relationships between and among beings; the 'I' and 'the other' as the human being and other beings as well. On this view, the community of *'be-ing'* already exists in potency and is actualised by the concrete existence of diverse human and other beings on planet Earth, including the continually unfolding pluriverse

Corresponding author:

Mogobe Bernard Ramose, University of South Africa, Pretler St, Pretoria 0002, South Africa.
Email: ramosmb@unisa.ac.za

(Jansch 1981; see also Findlay 1935). Recognising that ours is not the only universe is a crucial concession to the insights of contemporary physics in general and astrophysics in particular (Davies 1987: 121–137; see also the author's other works *The Runaway Universe*, *The Age of Infinity*, and *God and the New Physics*). It enjoins us to discard the archaic idea that 'the universe' – now to be understood as the pluriverse – has a centre (Cantore 1977: 403). The recognition of '*be-ing*', the pluriverse without a centre, implies the need to discard the 'I' or 'Self' as the centre of its existential condition. This decentring of the 'I' demands an openness ready and able to live in atunement to '*be-ing*'; to learn to live fluidity, complexity and indeterminacy (Powers 1982: 140–141; see also Heisenberg 1958). Our contention is that the cosmopolitan ideal, as the quest for *cosmos* or order, is to a very large extent resistant to the need to live fluidity, complexity and indeterminacy. This is the basis for the transcendence of cosmopolitanism. We now turn to consider this argument.

The exclusive boundary of cosmopolitanism

Writing towards the end of the Cold War, Mitias offers an insightful argument on the possibility of a world community, the necessary and, perhaps sufficient conditions, for establishing an order that will regulate the world community. He argues that a philosophical consideration of this issue is pertinent for two reasons. One is that the well-established military superpowers have not renounced their intention to use nuclear weapons. Other existing and emerging states retain a similar commitment with regard to the manufacture, acquisition and use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. This signals, for example, fear and distrust among the nations of the world each preferring to protect and promote itself as a separate community. Another reason is that the evidence of anarchy and co-operation in international politics still does leave 'power politics' as the final arbiter in conflict resolution. The reality of international co-operation engenders the need for '*inter-cultural openness*', enabling nations to learn about each other (Mitias 1990: 164).

Following upon his description of international politics at the time and why it calls for a consideration of the establishment of an order to regulate the peoples of the world, Mitias defines community as: 'a social medium in which a person fulfills his own destiny' (1990: 166). He argues that since no human being is complete in and by itself the assistance and co-operation of others is required to attain self-fulfilment and realisation. Communication is an integral part of his definition of community because communication opens up the possibility for mutual understanding. As a collective entity, the community must be characterised by shared values revolving around the principles of equal humanity and justice. He argues that democracy – as theory translated into actual practice – is the best means to realise the shared values. Mitias' option for democracy proceeds from his fundamental premise that diversity is an ontological datum of human existence. He transfers this to international politics and avers that a world community cannot be established unless it recognises 'international pluralism'. The problem with Mitias' conception of diversity is that it implies opposition giving rise to the need to reconcile the opposites. Since he is emphatic on the equality of all humans in their humanity, the opposition is not by necessity ontological. It is rather cultural. Thus '*inter-cultural openness*' becomes the gateway to enhanced mutual understanding. It could therefore lead to a wider and deeper sharing of values underlying the constitution of the 'world community'. Reaching out to the originally excluded 'other' until the attainment of the 'world community' on the basis of shared values is Mitias' brand of cosmopolitanism. Is this resistant to the need to live fluidity, complexity and indeterminacy? Before we address this question, it is pertinent to note that Mitias is not alone in this perspective of cosmopolitanism.

In his argument for a global ethic as a foundation for a global society, Küng recognises diversity. He argues that the differences between nations, cultures, religions and scientific views are so great that a complete agreement on an ethic is inconceivable. ‘There can be no total ethical consensus’ (Küng 1997: 93). Still he pleads for *minimal ethical consensus* on the ground that we are all *human beings*. In this he reaffirms Mitias. The reaffirmation implies that certain cultural norms and institutions remain solidly fixed: they are impenetrable and unalterable. Mitias upholds this idea in the argument that the attainment of the ideal of the ‘world community’ should not lead to the destruction or dissolution of the nation state. For him, ‘any attempt to work for establishing a world community should proceed from acknowledging the principle of the ultimacy of the nation state as a political and cultural integrity’ (Mitias 1990: 170). The belief that the nation state is ultimate, impenetrable and unalterable confers upon it an aura of eternity. Such a dogmatic (Pepper 1966: 11) belief is ironically resistant to the very cosmopolitanism which it aims to achieve. By what means does Küng prove aprioristically that there cannot be complete and total ethical consensus?

Mitias’ conviction about the ‘ultimacy’ of the nation state and Küng’s unproven aprioristic claim that there cannot be complete and total ethical consensus seem to be a prophecy concerning the movement towards European integration. It is indeed a long way from the Treaty of Rome to the Maastricht Treaty. The former speaks to the gradual and sustained economic integration of Europe whereas the latter represents the highpoint, the limit beyond which integration may not go precisely because of the threat it posed to the meaning of sovereignty.¹ Attempts to cultivate a sense of Europeanness beyond economic integration include many writings (Wilkinson 2003; Smismans 2003) on the subject and the establishment of the Erasmus programme in the sphere of education. Yet, when each member state cast its vote on the vision of a sovereign Europe the overwhelming preference was for the retention of the reality of sovereign nation statehood. The vote consequently deferred the vision of European cosmopolitanism into the indefinite future. For the time being, the vote thus lends credence to Mitias’ conviction about the ‘ultimacy’ of the nation state and Küng’s unproven aprioristic claim that there cannot be complete and total ethical consensus.

Despite its resistance to cosmopolitanism, the conceptual framework of Mitias and Küng continues to influence some writers. Also, the experience of the European Union in the march from the Treaty of Rome to the Maastricht Treaty does not seem to have invited the search for an alternative conceptual framework. Thus cosmopolitanism continues to be excogitated in terms of boundaries constituting communities separate from and exclusive of ‘the other’. For example, Cabrera espouses the concept of community in his definition of global citizenship. For him, ‘global citizenship holds the promise of delineating both the rights that individuals should be presumed to possess in the global human community, and the duties and institutionally linked obligations that can be viewed as incumbent on individuals in order to better secure the fulfilment of those rights’ (Cabrera 2008: 89). He also regards boundaries as points of exclusion in his exposition of cosmopolitanism (ibid.: 94).

For all the authors considered above, the principle of justice in all its dimensions is indispensable for the construction of the *cosmos*, a world order whose law all who share the values espoused shall be obliged to obey and be loyal to. But the realisation of justice may be impeded precisely by the fixation to the belief that certain cultural practices and institutions are impenetrable and unalterable. The -ism in cosmopolitanism speaks to this impediment. It is necessary to transcend this dogmatic dimension of cosmopolitanism in order to open up possibilities for the realisation of justice. The conception of boundary as a coupling point affirming relationships of complementarity promises to offer the much needed transcendence. It is to this conception that we now turn.

Transcending cosmopolitanism: boundary as a coupling point

The recognition of motion as the principle of *be-ing* entails the acknowledgement that *be-ing* is in a ceaseless state of becoming. To be is thus to ex-ist in a permanent state of -ness enduring for a while. The momentary endurance of -ness is being. *Be-ing* becoming manifests itself in multiple and various forms of being (Prigogine & Stengers 1984: 213–232; see also Prigogine 1980). The motion of *be-ing* is contemporaneously multi-directional. It is holocyclic (Bohm 1971: 54). Yet, the perception of *be-ing* is often interpreted procedatively, that is, according to a way of thinking or describing in terms of one-directional movement. The interpretation is the beginning of the fragmentation of *be-ing* (Bohm 1980: 1–26). It is an instance of the obliviousness of *be-ing* as wholeness. It is the ontological moment of the constitution of exclusive boundaries (Wilbur 1979: 3, 26). This obliviousness superimposes itself upon *be-ing* and claims the status of truth. And this claim is the specific character of the -ism as we find, for example, in cosmopolitanism. Our conception of *be-ing* outlined here is the philosophical basis for our argument that cosmopolitanism must be transcended since it is the negation of *be-ing* as a wholeness. We now turn to consider conceptions of boundary as a coupling point thus affirming the wholeness of *be-ing*.

According to Osuagwu (2003: 4), the Igbo word for the world is ‘*uwa*’: it means ‘the great unfolding’. The unfolding is conceived as a continual dynamic process thus embracing the idea that motion is the principle of *be-ing*. He then proceeds to consider the African archetype known as ‘*izu*’ in the Igbo language. ‘*Izu*’ can mean: (i) to meet or interact as in ‘*izukota*’; (ii) to be whole as in ‘*izuoke*’; (iii) to complete a cycle or period as in ‘*izuuka*’ and (iv) to rest or stabilise as in ‘*izuike*’ (ibid.: 7). Osuagwu interprets ‘*izu*’ as a symbol of relationships in the context of ‘the whole’. In view of the recognition of motion as the principle of *be-ing* and its inherent dynamism, we suggest that it is apposite to think in terms of the wholeness rather than ‘the whole’. On this reasoning, ‘*uwa*’ and ‘*uzu*’ speak to the -ness character of *be-ing*. It is the -ness character of ‘*uwa*’ which grounds Osuagwu’s submission that the ‘*oke*’, boundary is the ‘*igba-agba*’ the coupling point of entities (ibid.: 10). The boundary is conceived as a seamless complex network of entities. It is the ontological moment of conscious recognition of relatedness in the complex unfolding network of *be-ing*. No wonder that Bujo avers that from the African philosophic perspective, complex inter-relatedness is the ontological meaning of *be-ing*. And so he declares, ‘I am related, therefore, we are’. The Igbo concepts of ‘*uwa*’ and ‘*izu*’ establish conceptual kinship between the Igbo and the Bantu-speaking peoples through the concept of ‘*ubuntu*’ or ‘*botho*’ (I have elaborated upon this concept in Ramose 1999). Suffice it to state that it constitutes yet another philosophical basis for the argument that cosmopolitanism must be transcended. It would appear that the African conception of *be-ing* or life as outlined above is shared by Arabic philosophy as well (Hassan 1998: 3).

Crucial to the transcendence of cosmopolitanism as Mitias and Küng have appositely observed, is the principle of justice in practice. Equally important for the realisation of justice is Mitias’ pertinent observation that the constitution of the ‘world community’ must start from the bottom upwards. These apposite observations require step by step consensus arising from a polylogue of cultures. In his insightful critique of the post-Cold War world, Hassan makes a plea for ‘interactive justice’ in a pluralistic world to be protected eventually by such ‘interactive justice, equity, harmony and open channels of communication with all’. This is a plea for a polylogue among cultures for the sake of life in freedom and justice. The polylogue must take the principle of equality in human dignity seriously and move towards its deeper recognition, its fearless protection and robust promotion. Along this path our planet shall become an increasingly familiar and safer village where the ideal of justice – *maat* – is translated into practice. This is certainly a challenge that has eluded humankind for centuries because ‘in blindly pursuing progress, our civilization has, in effect,

institutionalized frustration. For in seeking to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative, we have forgotten entirely that the positive is defined only in terms of the negative. ... To destroy the negative is, at the same time, to destroy all possibility of enjoying the positive' (Wilber 1979: 21). We are likely to add to the centuries of frustration and elusiveness if we insist upon clinging to exclusive boundaries. The challenge before us in the twenty-first century is to transcend cosmopolitanism in pursuit of the existential promise to attain village civilisation in the unfolding complex pluriversality of *be-ing*.

*

We have argued that the prevailing thinking about cosmopolitanism is philosophically problematic. For this reason we have entered the plea for the transcendence of cosmopolitanism as a means to attain living justice for the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. Living interactive justice demands, among others, a fresh look at the moral imperative for the complete and total elimination of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The recognition of the moral imperative to pay reparations to the conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation and the necessity for Gaia thinking that will preserve and protect our already overheated planet from destruction. The fragmentation of *be-ing* carries with it the danger of sinking into the ocean of dogmatism and thus blocking the channels for the much needed polylogue among cultures aimed at transcending cosmopolitanism.

Note

1. Van Kleffens (1953) argues that the concept of sovereignty was born long before its transference into the domain of politics. On this view, it is understandable why the vote was in favour of the retention of sovereign nation statehood. The retention here implies the individual desire to retain and maintain its own sovereignty instead of transferring it – even if the transfer may be conditional – to a remote sovereign.

References

- Bohm, D (1971) 'Fragmentation in Science and Society', in W Fuller (ed) *The Social Impact of Modern Biology*, pp. 22–38. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bohm, D (1980) *Wholeness and The Implicate Order*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cabrera, L (2008) 'Global Citizenship as the Completion of Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 4(1): 89.
- Cantore, E (1977) *Scientific Man: The Humanistic Significance of Science*. New York: ISH Publications.
- Davies, P (1987) *The Cosmic Blueprint*. London: Heinemann.
- Findlay, A (1935) *The Unfolding Universe*. London: Psychic Press.
- Hassan, T A (1998) 'Beyond Eurocentrism and 'I-centrism'', unpublished paper presented to the Afro-Asian Conference, Cairo, Egypt.
- Hegel, G W F (1975) *Logic* [1830], ed. W Wallace. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Heisenberg, W (1958) *Physics and Philosophy*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hobbes, T (1962) *Body, Man and Citizen*, R S Peters (ed.) London: Collier Macmillan.
- Jansch, E., ed. (1981) *The Evolutionary Vision*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- van Kleffens, E N (1953) 'Sovereignty in International Law', *Recueil des cours de l'académie de droit international de La Haye*, 82: 1–132.
- Küng, H (1997) *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. London: SCM Press.
- Mitias, M (1990) 'Possibility of World Community', *Dialectics and Humanism*, xvii(2): 164.
- Osugwu, C (2003) 'African World Science and Medicine', unpublished paper presented to the University of South Africa, Department of Philosophy.

- Pepper, S C (1966) *World Hypotheses*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Powers, J (1982) *Philosophy and The New Physics*. London/New York: Methuen.
- Prigogine, I (1980) *From Being to Becoming*. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Prigogine, I and Stengers, I (1984) *Order Out of Chaos*. Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books.
- Ramosé, M B (1999) *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books Publishers.
- Smismans, S (2003) 'European Civil Society: Shaped by Discourses and Institutional Interests', *European Law Journal* 9(4): 473–495.
- Wilber, K (1979) *No Boundary*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Wilkinson, M A (2003) 'Civil Society and the Re-Imagination of European Constitutionalism', *European Law Journal* 9(4): 451–472.