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Title: Nussbaum On Cosmopolitanism *Versus* Patriotism

Abstract: I criticize Nussbaum’s views on cosmopolitanism and patriotism

NUSSBAUM ON COSMOPOLITANISM *VERSUS* PATRIOTISM

> She sees India, of all places—India, container of many universes of mores, arts, sights, smells, languages, dances, poetries, sexualities, colors, gods, horrors and ecstasies—as one of a series of concentric circles, with its problems of hunger and pollution related to "larger problems of global hunger and global ecology."
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> Pinsky 87

As evidenced by the number of recent articles and books, cosmopolitanism and patriotism are—like Powder Milk Biscuits—real hot items. Martha Nussbaum has been an especially prominent voice in these discussions. Although the title of her essay is "Patriotism *and* Cosmopolitanism," emphasis added, she claims that "patriotism is very close to jingoism" (Nussbaum 14). Nussbaum concedes that some of the goals of patriotism are "worthy," citing "the goal of national unity in devotion to worthy moral ideals of justice and equality" as an example. However, she believes that "these goals ... would be better served by an ideal that is in any case more adequate to our situation in the contemporary world, namely the very old ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings" (4).

Nussbaum seems to suggests that the only legitimate form of patriotism would be one where its object was the human community as a whole, rather than to a nation or group of people. Her cosmopolitanism appeals to a notion of the universal that is abstract and ahistorical. She is correct that cosmopolitanism should be affirmed, but it needs to be a historically situated "critical cosmopolitanism" (Walkowitz) or "rooted cosmopolitanism" (Appiah). So, what's wrong with Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism?

In articulating the relation between the universal and the local, Nussbaum turns to the ancient Stoics. She writes:

> The Stoics stress that to be citizens of the world one does not need to give up local identifications, which can be a source of great richness in life. They suggest that we think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one encircles the self, then next takes in the immediate family, then follows the extended family, then, in order, neighbors or local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and fellow countrymen—and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender, or sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world will be to "draw the circles somehow toward the center" (Stoic philosopher Hierocles, 1st-2nd CE), making all human beings more like our fellow city-dwellers, and so one. We need not give up our special affections and identifications, whether ethnic or gender-based or religious. We need not think of them as superficial, and we may think of our identity as constituted partly by them. We may and should devote special attention to them in education. But we should also work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concert, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality, and give the circle that defines our humanity special attention and respect.
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> Nussbaum 9

There are some things that should be affirmed in this view. It correctly recognizes that individuals initially have attachments to their families and communities, and that the goal is to view others as also belonging to such circles. It also perceives that there may still be legitimate differences between these circles.

Nevertheless, this view has limitations. In agreeing with the Stoics that affiliations are a series of hierarchically arranged concentric circles, Nussbaum wrongly believes that moral obligations also follows such a pattern, with one circle having hegemony over all others. *"One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in darkness bind them"* (Tolkien 59). Imagining affiliations as a series of concentric circles is not an apt metaphor—overlapping irregular polygons would

be better—because these affiliations cannot be neatly arranged in a hierarchy.[1] Persons do not always remain within a specific affiliation, but the relations between affiliations are dynamic. They make competing and inconsistent demands and there is no algorithm to determine which ones should receive priority. Rather, this is a matter of practical wisdom.

Whereas the Stoics seek to draw the more distant affiliations toward the center—towards those of self, family, and neighbors—Nussbaum instead believes that it is crucial to pull the more central affiliations toward the periphery, to humanity as a whole. Otherwise, she fears, it will not be possible to contest self-definitions which emphasize local attachments while refusing to recognize any obligations beyond those. She argues:

> Once someone has said, I am an Indian first, a citizen of the world second, once he or she has made that morally questionable move of self-definition by a morally irrelevant characteristic, then what indeed, will stop that person from saying ... I am a Hindu first, and an Indian second, or I am an upper-caste landlord first, and a Hindu second. Only the cosmopolitan stance ... has the promise of transcending these divisions, because only this stance asks us to give our first allegiance to what is morally good—and that which, being good, I can commend as such to all human beings.
> Nussbaum 5

Nussbaum credits the Stoics for recognizing that, although individuals should be citizens of the world, they need neither repudiate their "special affections and identifications" nor "think of them as superficial," and that "we may think of our identity as constituted partly by them" (9). Nevertheless, she regards all such local attachments, including a person's self-definition as a citizen of a country, as "morally irrelevant." Her argument eliminates the moral dimension of familial, neighborly, and citizenly associations, retaining only the universal ones which individuals share with all others as human beings. In a word, Nussbaum reduces politics to ethics. That is to say, she is exclusively concerned with the

[1] Indeed, a polygonal chain, also referred to as a piecewise linear curve, would be an even better metaphor.

ethical obligations humans have for other humans, in virtue of their being human. She does not ask what obligations citizen of a country might have toward their fellow citizens. Nussbaum claims that "we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings. We should recognize humanity whenever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect" (7). She is right to maintain that differences in class, ethnicity, gender, nationality cannot excuse injustice. However, she is incorrect to maintain that an individual's self-definition as a member of one or more of these groups has no moral significance. She is also wrong to claim that barriers should not be erected on the basis of such differences. It is necessary to talk about specific situations to determine under what circumstances which kinds of barriers are justified. Nations may legitimately have entrance requirements and limit immigration, the Bengali Association of Greater Atlanta may restrict membership, women may receive benefits during pregnancy which are denied to men, bathrooms need not be unisex.

She writes that "by conceding that a morally arbitrary boundary such as the boundary of the nation has a deep and formative role in our deliberations, we seem to deprive ourselves of any principled way of persuading citizens they should in fact join hands across these other barriers" (14). A nation's boundary is arbitrary—although "contingent" would be a less pejorative word—in that it might have been different, but it does not follow from this that the claims of citizenship or individuals' self-definition as citizens of a country are morally irrelevant. It is only because persons already have ties to each other as fellow nationals that there is a possibility of persuading *citizens* to join hands across other barriers. Indeed, the metaphor of a citizen of the world is intelligible only because there is a prior understanding of what it means to be a citizen of a nation.

Claiming that citizen have obligations and responsibilities to each other which do not extend to non-citizens does not mean that the citizens of a country have no responsibility to non-citizens.

There are two other problems with Nussbaum's argument. First, it wrongly assumes that the elements which constitute an individual's self-definition must have a determinate and fixed sortal ordering. Instead, how people rank those elements depends upon the particular context in which they find themselves. In some circumstances it will be sensible to begin a self-definition by saying that one is human—when making first contact with the Klingons, for example—but that will not usually be true. Second, there are those who say that persons should always be on the side of the oppressed. It would seem that Nussbaum agrees. In that case, however, a self-definition will begin by identifying with those who are oppressed. If upper-caste landlords are oppressed, for example, then it is appropriate to say I am an upper-caste landlord first. No doubt Nussbaum would instead urge that appeal should be made to the shared humanity whose dignity is violated when landlords are oppressed. It is not humanity as such that is being oppressed, however, but a specific group of persons. It is true, of course, that the distinguishing features of any specific group can be bracketed so that only their characteristics as humans are considered. (But why stop there? Why not bracket those characteristics so that only what they share in common with mammals, animals, sentient beings, or life is considered? It is the interests that emerge in a particular conjuncture that determine when it is relevant to stop.) If the distinguishing features of a group are abstracted away in this manner, though, it is likely that the ways in which they are being oppressed will be lost too.

If Nussbaum's universal cosmopolitanism cannot provide an adequate reply to those who claim that they are Hindus first, what might be said instead? In *The Intimate*

Enemy, Nandy writes that "the alternative to Hindu nationalism is the peculiar mix of classical and folk Hinduism and the unselfconscious Hinduism by which most Indians, Hindus as well as non-Hindus, live" (104). Authenticity is a concept which must be handled with care and perhaps regarded with suspicion. Nevertheless, one response to those who define themselves as Hindus first would be to urge that such a self-understanding risks missing authentic Hinduism—its inclusiveness, openness, and polyphony—and instead transmogrifying it into an exclusive set of dogmas. "Hinduism is not a single faith but a vast complex of beliefs and practices with infinite nuances and variations," Colleen Taylor Sen observes in *Food Cultures in India*, and she also perceives that "middle-class Westernized Hindus living in cities behave quite differently from villagers" (Sen 29). When individuals claim that they are Hindus first, they risk loosing Hinduism. Contrary to Nussbaum's belief that only an appeal to universal cosmopolitanism can counter someone who claims to be a Hindu first, such a response can be articulated from within Hinduism itself (this is an effect of Amartya Sen's *Argumentative Indian*). As Nandy notes, moreover, attempts to distinguish between what is and is not Indian have their limitations because "the West that is aggressive is sometimes inside; the earnest, self-declared native, too, is often an exogenous category, and the Hindu who announces himself so, is not that Hindu after all. Probably the uniqueness of Indian culture lies not so much in a unique ideology as in the society's traditional ability to live with cultural ambiguities and to use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defences against cultural invasions. Probably, the culture itself demands that a certain permeability of boundaries be maintained in one's self-image and that the self be not defined too tightly or separated mechanically from the not-self" (107). Although Nussbaum's universal cosmopolitanism cannot provide an adequate reply to

those who claim that they are Hindus first, there are resources in Hinduism itself to articulate such a response.

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