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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1816001>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-188662>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Beckstein, Martin (2020). Cosmopolitan arrogance, epistemic modesty and the motivational prerequisites for solidarity. *Ethics Global Politics*, 13(3):1816001.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1816001>



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To cite this article: Martin Beckstein (2020) Cosmopolitan arrogance, epistemic modesty and the motivational prerequisites for solidarity, *Ethics & Global Politics*, 13:3, 1816001, DOI: [10.1080/16544951.2020.1816001](https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1816001)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1816001>



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Published online: 08 Oct 2020.



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ARTICLE

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## Cosmopolitan arrogance, epistemic modesty and the motivational prerequisites for solidarity

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### ABSTRACT

To assess the merits and demerits of the content of Culp's educational programme, the paper does three things: First, it discusses whether Culp's defence against conceivable objections manages to effectively dispel the charge of cosmopolitan arrogance. Second, it spells out one implication of epistemic modesty, which Culp considers a core competence to be imparted by citizenship education. Third, it reflects upon the tricky task of motivating individuals to comply with the demands of justice. Taken together, the paper argues that Culp's case is impressively strong but nevertheless tends to suffer from a rationalist constriction. It does not leave sufficient room for tradition in private life and public reasoning. This rationalist constriction is problematic from a normative philosophical, and especially a practice-oriented viewpoint.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 June 2020  
Revised 31 July 2020  
Accepted 24 August 2020

### KEYWORDS

Cosmopolitanism; solidarity; epistemic modesty; tradition; democracy; education

## Introduction

In his thought-provoking book – *Democratic Education in a Globalized World* – Julian Culp (2019) casts a global justice perspective on education. He draws two main conclusions, one concerning the status and the other the content of education. First, Culp argues that every person possesses not only a domestic legal but a universal moral right to basic education. Second, education should promote democratic agency; i.e. students should be prepared for their future roles as democratic citizens, both within as well as across national borders. Culp is to be applauded for addressing a subject so far neglected by the global justice literature. Education, moreover, is a particularly important subject for any emancipatory political philosophy because in order for institutional change to be broadly and lastingly accepted the cultivation of a corresponding public consciousness is required. Culp's call for a global democratic citizenship education thus makes an important contribution to complementing the rich institutionalist scholarship on cosmopolitanism. It broadens our minds to the moral world beyond the nation state without forgetting that such an exploration must bring young generations on board. Notably, it also fathoms the implications of global justice without eclipsing the need for a democratic debate as to what that exactly

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entails. As such, Culp's contribution is to be highly valued. And it is to be valued regardless of whether it will help increasing the popularity of the cosmopolitan project.

That the findings of Culp's investigation might scare off some open-minded readers, rather than winning them over to cosmopolitanism, can already be sensed from considering a practical implication of the first main conclusion. The recognition of basic education as a universal moral right, Culp argues, does not, or not exclusively, require a vertical redistribution of resources. To recall, domestic social justice conceptions ask the better-off to relinquish some of their resources to improve the educational opportunities of less advantaged groups in their society. And so, one might expect that a global justice conception simply asks the better-off worldwide to give up enough money for such a redistribution within and across societies. But Culp suggests that global justice at least additionally requires a horizontal redistribution. The less advantaged groups in rich societies ought to accept that some of the resources available for increasing their educational opportunities are branched off to achieve a basic level of education in poor societies. Equalizing educational opportunity within a country, says Culp (p. 12; see also Chapter 3.4), 'is extremely – if not infinitely – costly'; it constitutes 'an endless task that dries up motivational and monetary resources that would otherwise be available for achieving much more basic levels of education elsewhere.'

In the following, I shall limit myself to the second conclusion Culp draws from his global justice approach, and examine the content of his educational program. He characterizes it as a 'civic republican conception' (p. 41) that aims at promoting autonomy, democratic agency and the formation of a consciousness for justice. At the same time, Culp (p. 44) is at pains to demonstrate that his account comprehensively lives up to the 'liberal principle of neutrality.' In fact, he dedicates two entire chapters to refuting what others have labelled the charge of 'cosmopolitan arrogance' (Yack 2012, 284; see also Cabrera 2020): the promotion of a Eurocentric or paternalist agenda in the name of universal morality. This vice, if applicable to the project of transnational citizenship education, would be particularly severe. For whereas cosmopolitan institutionalists were to be criticized for inadvertently imposing a pseudouniversal vision of order onto the world, cosmopolitan educationalists such as Culp would come under suspicion of trying to intellectually disable future generations from criticizing such a vision. Critics might see in the goal of 'transnational democratic conscientization' (p. 109) a morally parochial assault on the mind.

To assess the merits and demerits of the content of Culp's educational program, I start by discussing whether Culp's defence against conceivable objections manages to effectively dispel the charge of cosmopolitan arrogance (1). I then spell out one implication of epistemic modesty, which Culp considers a core competence to be imparted by citizenship education (2). Finally, I reflect upon the tricky task of motivating individuals to comply with the demands of justice (3). I conclude that Culp's case is impressively strong but nevertheless tends to suffer from a rationalist constriction. It does not leave sufficient room for tradition in private life and public reasoning. This rationalist constriction is problematic from a normative philosophical, and especially a practice-oriented viewpoint.

## The charge of cosmopolitan arrogance

The charge of cosmopolitan arrogance is tackled in Chapters 6 and 7 of *Democratic Education in a Globalized World*. The general claim being defended is that the educational model recommended in the book does justice to the liberal principle of neutrality, and that the liberal principle of neutrality is really neutral. One specific argument employed by Culp is that the education for autonomy as thought of by liberal perfectionism is indeed parochial. Unless aggressively proselytizing or directly affecting others negatively, people should be allowed to lead their private lives as they please. Liberal perfectionism, however, establishes the norm of the autonomous life. It arrogates itself to disqualify lifestyles that are culturally inherited instead of individualistically developed. Liberal perfectionism illegitimately interferes with individual liberty, and perhaps, additionally defeats its own ideal by exerting a heteronomous pressure on all those who are not yet leading the autonomous life (pp. 146–7). But education may pursue a different path in spite of aiming at the promotion of autonomy. The reason is, Culp argues following Rawls (2001, 156), that personal autonomy can be construed in two ways, ethical or moral. The former postulates that individuals lead flourishing lives only if they follow a conception of the good that they have themselves articulated. This is the variety liberal perfectionists such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Stuart Mill recommended (pp. 29–33). The latter, by contrast, makes room for those who endorse inherited and thus heteronomous value systems. Personal moral autonomy, says Culp (p. 148; order of the argument reversed), ‘does not demand of individuals to conceive of themselves in a way such that they *have to* come up with individualistically developed conceptions of the good life ... it merely prepares individuals to recognize their moral status and to act morally.’ In other words, individuals may make use of their right to pursue individually chosen lifestyles or not. The important thing is that they see in themselves and others moral agents endowed with this right. Self-enslavement is permissible as long as it is self-chosen and revocable.

Culp has a point: personal moral autonomy indeed does not educate students towards the cultivation of any positive ideal. Nevertheless, it falls short of the hoped-for neutrality. Though individual choice is not posited as the natural end of flourishing lives, it acts as a moral referee with the competence to disqualify. Individuals may accept passed-on cultural roles, even such that offend Western and liberal ideals of self-sufficiency. Yet they shall be trained to scrutinize the desirability of their respective way of life, and hold on to it only if confirmed by their individual reasoning: ‘Public policies should enable students to think for themselves as to whether they can authentically endorse the particular conceptions of the good life into which they have been socialized’ (p. 183). The extent to which the liberal principle of neutrality is thus being violated is small but not insignificant. For it is one thing to demand that one’s individual conception of the good is compatible with the fact of (reasonable) pluralism – justice requires tolerance. Accordingly, there is good reason to demand that everyone acknowledges the equal moral worth of other persons and attributes to them the right to pursue whatever lifestyle, including individually chosen ones, as long as they do not interfere with the lifestyles of others. It is another thing to demand that everyone attributes this right to him- or herself as a private person, too, thus additionally conditioning permissible conceptions of the good on conscious and rational

approval. While liberal perfectionism meets this additional requirement, a religious way of life typically does not. Lutheranism, a rather sober-minded Christian confession, for instance asks believers for a confirmation of their faith (usually at the age of fourteen, after having been baptized as infants, and schooled as well as socialized for many years), not for conscious and rational approval (and how should that be possible in the case of a religious faith anyway?). A faithful parishioner does not need to have seriously considered converting to Buddhism or to religious humanism, and may even deny him- or herself the temptation to think such thoughts. A liberal society can perfectly live with people like that as long as they, for the sake of public peace, do not deny others the right to convert. Hence, even though personal moral autonomy may not positively articulate a substantive ideal of the good life, it leaves insufficient room for traditional ways of life.

### Epistemic modesty and the role of tradition in politics

So far we have seen that a key value informing Culp's educational model – autonomy – suffers from a slight rationalist constriction. The same applies, I will argue now, to his conception of epistemic modesty, i.e. the primary competence to be imparted on his account by transnational democratic citizenship education. Epistemic modesty is described as an 'indispensable virtue of democratically conscious persons.' They ought to 'acknowledge the limits of what they know – in terms of both the scope and certainty of their knowledge' (p. 124). I agree on the importance of epistemic modesty for citizenship education, even though I'm inclined to grasp it as a virtue rather than a competence. But just as Culp fails to fully acknowledge the legitimacy of inherited ways of thinking and doing in private life, it occurs to me that his account of epistemic modesty falls short of acknowledging the value of inherited institutions and policies in the public sphere.

To be sure, the issue at stake here is distinct from the charge of cosmopolitan arrogance. The problem is not a violation of the liberal principle of neutrality. Neither do I sense Eurocentrism, a common objection against cosmopolitan projects to which Culp dedicates an entire chapter. Whether universally cherished as a virtue or not, epistemic modesty has a firm place in cultures around the globe, including Buddhist and Indian philosophy (Dalmiya 2016, esp. 115–17; McRae 2013). If anything, it sits uneasily with the ideal of unwavering faith in monotheistic religions ('But let him ask in faith [for wisdom], without any doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed', Jacob 1:6–7). Nor is the point that epistemic modesty would be incompatible with certain conceptions of the good. This might be the case, but epistemic modesty, in the present context, is of interest as a public and 'moral', not as a general ethical virtue (cf. Button 2016, 16). In other words, individuals need not be able to reconcile epistemic modesty with their respective conceptions of the good, but ought to embrace it for pluralism's sake whenever entering the stage of social and political life. Epistemically modest persons will thus, as Culp (p. 124) rightly concludes, 'refrain from enforcing or imposing particular policies on the presumption that they know the relevant information with certainty' and be willing to 'enter in dialogue with others ... [that] hold beliefs that are very different from their own.' Instead, the point is that epistemic modesty tends to dovetail with a conservative rather than progressive

attitude in politics. From acknowledging the limits of what we can individually know it is just one step to embracing a status-quo orientation in politics. How so?

The public order is an extremely complex compound of interdependent legal institutions and social habits, many of which have been the result of intense deliberation, cautious experimentation, protracted negotiation processes and, yes, horse-trading. Because of this, responsible policy- and polity-making requires more than comparing the desirability of an existing policy or institution, considered in isolation, with some alternative designed at the philosophical drawing table. The transition from A to B, subsequent institutional or policy-related readjustments and adaptation, as well as the familiarization of citizens to the new realities is costly. Assuming the virtue of epistemic modesty, we will acknowledge two things. First, it is usually impossible to anticipate the exact overall costs of change in advance. Second, established institutions – insofar as they have been the result of intense deliberation, cautious experimentation, protracted negotiation processes and horse-trading – constitute valuable storage systems for practical knowledge and accumulated historical experience. They already have been made to fit the complex compound of interdependent legal institutions and social habits (Gee and Webber 2019, esp. Section 3; Marsh 2012; Oakeshott 1991). As a consequence, we should place the burden of proof upon the innovator. More precisely, it is reasonable to employ a rebuttable presumption in favour of the given. The point is not to freeze history. Not rarely existing policies and institutions are clearly unjust or defective, and can safely be replaced by better alternatives. But sometimes the transitions costs might outweigh the expected normative gain of political change. And because of the law of diminishing marginal utility, it is appropriate to oppose a reform or innovation even if it is equally likely that this reform or innovation increases or decreases the overall value of the political order by the same amount (Brennan and Hamlin 2004, 685). In short, epistemic modesty encourages making some room for tradition in our use of public reason, to enfranchise our ancestors so to speak (Chesterton 1908, ch., 4). With elevating epistemic modesty to a prime competence of democratic citizens, Culp strikes a promising path. With admitting (p. 146, 157 n. 14) that within certain circumstances it might be permissible or even desirable to defer individual judgement to authorities, he pushes the door open for a concession to tradition in politics, but then does not go through.

### **The motivational prerequisites for solidarity**

Up to this point we have seen that the educational program presented by Culp does not sufficiently justify the rationalistic narrowing as it reflects in the conceptualizations of personal moral autonomy and epistemic modesty. There is plenty of room for discussion as to whether such a constriction is normatively problematic. What political theory could ever hope to be value-free after all? Perhaps it is also true that the existing literature on citizenship education and global justice is more concerned with avoiding illiberal parochialism and conservative status-quo biases than their liberal and progressive equivalents, which might explain a strategic focus. Yet Culp insists on defending his model under the aegis of neutrality and bias freeness, and thereby on the one hand tends to feed the charge of cosmopolitan arrogance and, on the other hand, to barter a moderate status-quo orientation for a progressive bias (with potentially far-reaching consequences for his overall conception of citizenship education).

However, the question of the greatest importance, in my view, is whether the marginalization of tradition is bound to damp the motivation for engaging in transnational solidarity. Liberal-individualist rationalism has always been criticized for its bloodlessness. The education for autonomy (ethical or moral), Sandel (1996, ch., 9) argued for instance, habituates students to understanding individual rights as trumps against society. A more promising strategy is to recognize the axiological and epistemological value of tradition in private and public life, and to proactively acknowledge the dependency of abstract reasoning (i.e. rationality) on formed ways of thinking and acting (i.e. tradition).<sup>1</sup> It better helps to sensitize students to the idea that the enjoyment of individual rights simultaneously calls for a recognition of social obligations, such as a moral responsibility to maintain the institutional order that grants these rights.

Whatever the virtue of this argument, Culp's educational program conspicuously focuses on the intellectual skills necessary to empower citizens while treating questions of collective identification and the emotional economy motivating democratic solidarity as orphans. This is a pity. Precisely because it is so typical for cosmopolitan theorizing. Social justice models favouring a nation-statebased world order have always paid greater attention to the intricacies of political stability. They rely on a two-track conception of justice with human rights *and* membership rights, suspicious that respecting persons as free and equals, and passively abiding by the rules of the democratic game, is enough to keep the body politic fit and well (Taylor 1989; see also Kymblicka 2020). The civil association is literally grasped as *res publica* – as that which belongs to the people – i.e. a common possession of its citizens. The ensuing membership is meant to nourish a shared identity, loyalties and emotional attachments, in order to facilitate a sense of co-responsibility for the well-being of others over and above the general respect for the moral agency of human beings. Joint property fosters mutual care and feelings of being part of a community of fate, social justice models imagine, while admittedly accepting the exclusive nature of membership to set a particularly strong incentive for (non-universal) solidarity. Historically considered, it is also true that democracy has always been established on the basis of special rather than universal obligations.

It is of course a legitimate question whether the historical connection is a contingent by-product or an integral component of democracy's architecture. We may ask whether feelings of collective identity motivating a rich sense of civic virtue and solidarity can be levelled-up to encompass humanity as a whole, whether social justice can smoothly be transformed into global justice. But we need to address these questions head-on, not shy away from the uncomfortable consideration that fostering feelings of togetherness might engender moral costs. Ensuring the motivational prerequisites for solidarity is a pivotal issue too often sidetracked by political philosophy. Perhaps it is particularly urgent today, given the widespread understanding that solidarity is, at least in these unsettling times, reducible to social distancing and neighbourly help.

Without any doubt, Culp makes an important move in the right direction. He is perceptive to the fact that democracy must 'continually reproduce the cultural and moral preconditions of its own existence' (Honneth 2015, 19; quoted by Culp on p. 3). He intends to approximate a 'civic republican' conception of citizenship education, and

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<sup>1</sup>For attempts to rescue tradition from obstinate traditionalists, and rationality from unwavering rationalists, see Popper (1972), Scheffler (2010). See also Beckstein (2017, 2019).



emphasizes that instruction in multiculturalism must also aim at appreciating the contingency of one's own culture (pp. 41, 183). I am just slightly worried that his approach to 'transnational democratic conscientization' draws more inspiration from Rome rather than Athens; that it is overly concerned with steering clear of identity politics and romanticism; and that it places too much emphasis on rational insight and voluntary agreement rather than feelings of inherited ownership and involuntary obligations. All the more I am anxious to see whether Culp's next research project takes the global justice perspective on education another step further.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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