QUESTIONING COSMOPOLITANISM
STUDIES IN GLOBAL JUSTICE

VOLUME 6

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Aims and Scope
In today’s world, national borders seem irrelevant when it comes to international crime and terrorism. Likewise, human rights, poverty, inequality, democracy, development, trade, bioethics, hunger, war and peace are all issues of global rather than national justice. The fact that mass demonstrations are organized whenever the world’s governments and politicians gather to discuss such major international issues is testimony to a widespread appeal for justice around the world.

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Contributors

**Tom Campbell**  Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia, Tom.Campbell@anu.edu.au

**Jiwei Ci**  University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, jiweici@hkucc.hku.hk

**Nigel Dower**  University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, n.dower@abdn.ac.uk

**Siby K. George**  Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India, kgsiby@iitb.ac.in

**Carol C. Gould**  Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA, cgould@temple.edu

**Holly Lawford-Smith**  University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, holly@coombs.anu.edu.au

**Andrew Linklater**  Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales, adl@aber.ac.uk

**Vince P. Marotta**  Deakin University, VIC, Australia, vince.marotta@deakin.edu.au

**Rekha Nath**  University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, reknath@gmail.com

**Steven Slaughter**  Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, slaughts@deakin.edu.au

**Stan van Hooft**  Deakin University, VIC, Australia, stanvh@deakin.edu.au

**Wim Vandekerckhove**  University of Greenwich Business School, London, UK, wim.vandekerckhove@gmail.com

**An Verlinden**  Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium, an.verlinden@ugent.be
About the Authors

**Tom Campbell** is a Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia. He is the author of *The Left and Rights* (1983), *Seven Theories of Human Society* (1981), *Justice* (2001), and *Rights: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2006), Tom.Campbell@anu.edu.au

**Jiwei Ci** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong and the author of *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford University Press 1994) and *The Two Faces of Justice* (Harvard University Press 2006), jiweici@hkucc.hku.hk


**Siby K. George** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, Mumbai, India. His major areas of interest are: continental philosophy, ethical and political debates in contemporary India, and global and development ethics. He has authored *Existential Authenticity* (2004) and is coeditor of the interdisciplinary collection *Tribe, Culture, Art* (2005), besides publishing a number of papers in refereed journals. His most recent representative publication is “Birth of the subject: The ethics of monitoring development programmes” in the *Journal of Global Ethics* (2008, 4/1; DOI: 10.1080/17449620701855312), kgsiby@iitb.ac.in

**Carol C. Gould** is Professor of Philosophy and Political Science and Director of the Center for Global Ethics & Politics at Temple University. She is also Editor of the *Journal of Social Philosophy* and Executive Director of the Society for
Philosophy and Public Affairs. Gould is the author of *Marx’s Social Ontology* (1978), *Rethinking Democracy* (1988), and *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights* (2004), editor of seven books, and has published numerous articles in social and political philosophy, philosophy of law, feminist theory, and applied ethics, cgould@temple.edu

**Holly Lawford-Smith** is currently a visiting lecturer at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and a graduate student at the Australian National University (Research School of Social Sciences). She works in Political Philosophy, on the concept of feasibility and its application to discussions about global justice, holly@coombs.anu.edu.au

**Andrew Linklater** is Woodrow Wilson Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University, having previously taught at the University of Tasmania, Monash University and Keele University. He has published several books on theories of international relations including, (with Hidemi Suganami), *The English school of international relations: a contemporary reassessment*, Cambridge University Press, 2006; *The transformation of political community: ethical foundations of the Post-Westphalian era*, University of South Carolina Press, 1998; *Beyond realism and Marxism: critical theory and international relations*, Macmillan, 1990; and most recently, *Critical Theory and World Politics: Sovereignty, Citizenship and Humanity* (Routledge, 2007). The chapter in this volume grows out of recent research on a three-volume study of the problem of harm in global politics, adl@aber.ac.uk

**Vince P. Marotta** is a lecturer in sociology at Deakin University, Australia and is the editor of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (Routledge). His research and publications have focused on urban sociology, multicultural cities, cultural identity, the migration experience, attitudes to immigrants, and the nature of cross-cultural understanding. His recent publication is “The hybrid self and the ambivalence of boundaries” *Social Identities*, 14/3: 295–312, 2008, vince.marotta@deakin.edu.au

**Rekha Nath** is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne. She completed her BA in Political Science and Philosophy at the University of Michigan and taught at University of Auckland in New Zealand in the latter half of 2009. Her current research is in political philosophy, with a focus on issues of global justice, reknath@gmail.com

**Steven Slaughter** obtained a Grad.Dip. in Public Policy from Murdoch University and his PhD from Monash University in Australia. He is now a Lecturer in International Relations at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. His main publications are *Liberty Beyond Neo-liberalism: A Republican Critique of Liberal Governance in a Globalising Age* (2005) and *Globalisation and Citizenship: The Transnational Challenge* (co-edited with Wayne Hudson, 2007). Before joining Deakin University in 2004 he taught at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Monash University, Melbourne University and the Australian National University. He has also taught at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies in Canberra. His
research interests include globalization, global governance and International Political Theory, slaughts@deakin.edu.au

**Wim Vandekerckhove** is Senior Lecturer in HRM and Organizational Behaviour at the University of Greenwich Business School in London. He is very thankful to the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and the Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry at Ghent University for the opportunity to co-edit this book. He is a co-founder of the International Global Ethics Association, the coordinator of the SRI Interest Group within the European Business Ethics Network, and the chairman for academic relations at the EPEGON Foundation. He publishes and teaches on business ethics, corporate social responsibility, global ethics, whistleblowing and socially responsible investment, wim.vandekerckhove@gmail.com

**Stan van Hooft** is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University in Australia. He is the author of *Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics*, (Niwot, University Press of Colorado, 1995) and numerous journal articles on moral philosophy, bioethics, business ethics, and on the nature of health and disease. He is also a co-author of *Facts and Values: An Introduction to Critical Thinking for Nurses*, (Sydney, MacLennan and Petty, 1995). His *Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources for Bioethics*, was published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New York) in 2004. Stan published two further books in 2006: *Caring about Health*, (Aldershot, Ashgate), and *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, (Chesham, Acumen Publishers). 2009 saw the publication of his *Cosmopolitanism: A Philosophy for Global Ethics* by Acumen. He conducts Modern Socratic Dialogues in a variety of settings with professional groups, with the general public and with individuals, stanvh@deakin.edu.au

**An Verlinden** obtained a Master degree in Moral Science (2000) and Criminology (2002) at Ghent University, Belgium. She did research for the international non-profit organization Child Focus and worked as a researcher at Ghent University and the University of Antwerp. Since November 2004, she has been an academic assistant at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Science at Ghent University, where she is co-responsible for the courses “Philosophical Ethics” and “World Ethics”. She is preparing a Ph.D. on the Ethics of Immigration. Her research interests include global ethics, asylum and (forced) migration, migration and integration policies in the context of globalization and human rights of minorities, an.verlinden@ugent.be
Introduction

Wim Vandekerckhove and Stan van Hooft

The philosopher, Diogenes the Cynic, in the fourth century BCE, was asked where he came from and where he felt he belonged. He answered that he was a “citizen of the world” (kosmopolitês)\(^1\). This made him the first person known to have described himself as a cosmopolitan. A century later, the Stoics had developed that concept further, stating that the whole cosmos was but one polis, of which the order was logos or right reason. Living according to that right reason implied showing goodness to all of human kind. Through early Christianity, cosmopolitanism was given various interpretations, sometimes quite contrary to the inclusive notion of the Stoics. Augustine’s interpretation, for example, suggested that only those who love God can live in the universal and borderless “City of God”. Later, the rediscovery of Stoic writings during the European Renaissance inspired thinkers like Erasmus, Grotius and Pufendorf to draw on cosmopolitanism to advocate world peace through religious tolerance and a society of states. That same inspiration can be noted in the American and French revolutions. In the eighteenth century, enlightenment philosophers such as Bentham (through utilitarianism) and Kant (through universal reason) developed new and very different versions of cosmopolitanism that serve today as key sources of cosmopolitan philosophy. The nineteenth century saw the development of new forms of transnational ideals, including that of Marx’s critique of capitalism on behalf of an international working class.

But the nineteenth century also gave rise to criticism of the cosmopolitan ideal. In the context of the construction of national identities, cosmopolitanism was denounced as the love of no country and as antithetical to national pride. Accordingly, rather than being a term of praise, the adjective “cosmopolitan” came to be used to describe individuals who were seen to have an inadequate commitment or loyalty to the community or nation in which they resided. Cosmopolitans were seen to be footloose individuals who were willing to move wherever opportunity beckoned them. They were thought to have insufficient concern for their own compatriots or ethnicities and to have an excessive interest in the lives and cultures of foreign peoples. In more recent times, this pejorative usage has occurred with

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reference to the class of international entrepreneurs, entertainers, tourists or fashionistas who are equally at home in the boardrooms, casinos or salons of New York, London, Berlin or Shanghai.

While such usages highlight the global outlook of the many people who participate to a high degree in the possibilities opened up by contemporary globalization, and disparage their apparent lack of local roots, what they miss in the original term, “cosmopolitan”, is the concept of citizenship. A cosmopolitan is not just someone who feels at home in a globalized world, travels widely, and enjoys the cultural products of a global market. A cosmopolitan is a citizen of the world. This stress on the notion of citizenship implies a commitment and responsibility extended towards all of the peoples of the world, and a readiness to express such a commitment through political action in the context of institutions with a global reach.²

Today the term “cosmopolitanism” is widely used in the fields of political science,³ international relations,⁴ sociology,⁵ cultural studies,⁶ history,⁷ political philosophy⁸ and global ethics.⁹ It represents a broad and disparate set of attitudes, commitments and policies on the part of individuals such as citizens, scholars, politicians, and national and international leaders, and on the part of governments,

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non-government organizations (NGOs), and transnational organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and multinational business corporations. Broadly conceived, the term refers to both ethical commitments and political policies which embrace the whole world in their purview and which refuse to prioritize local, parochial or national concerns. In a globalized world, our ethical and political responsibilities do not stop at national borders or at the boundaries of identity-forming groups – whether these are religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial or traditional. As a consequence, the range of these responsibilities is vast.

In June, 2008 the second biennial conference of the International Global Ethics Association was held in Melbourne, Australia, on the theme: “Questioning Cosmopolitanism”. In holding the conference in Australia, the International Global Ethics Association facilitated the participation of scholars, students and opinion shapers from Asian regions as well as from Europe and the Americas. More than sixty papers were delivered on a very wide range of topics of concern to global citizens.

When it was decided to publish a book containing a selection of papers from the conference, this variety of topics and the quality of the papers presented a problem. Most papers had been refereed as part of the conference programming process, so we knew that they were of high quality. Accordingly, how could a relatively small selection be made? And how could a mere selection present a development of ideas along a defined intellectual trajectory? The task of “questioning cosmopolitanism” was clearly broader than could be encompassed within the covers of a single volume.

Accordingly, it was decided that the book would focus upon the attitudes and ethical commitments which constitute the cosmopolitan vision. In more technical terms, it was decided to explore the nature and implications of what we might call “Cosmopolitan Subjectivity”. What is it to be a global citizen? Alongside the policy prescriptions, political stances and institutional arrangements which are expressive of cosmopolitanism, there are individual existential dimensions and ethical commitments which constitute the cosmopolitan identity and motivate the cosmopolitan outlook. Whereas many liberal theorists, such as John Rawls, envisage moral and political subjectivity as abstracted from all the particular attachments, concerns, and commitments to substantive conceptions of a good life that an individual might have – a form of subjectivity created by being placed behind a veil of ignorance about one’s own chances of having one’s preferences met – our argument is that cosmopolitanism must be a form of subjectivity lived by real people in concrete and normatively thick situations. While the original position heuristic may allow us to see through the other’s eyes, as it were, it does so at the expense of bracketing the existential and ethical reality of our subjectivity.

A cosmopolitan form of subjectivity differs in fundamental ways from the forms of subjectivity that express themselves in chauvinism, nationalism, intolerance of difference, belligerence towards foreigners, racism, imperialism, ignorance of other cultures, and bigotry. In our view, contemporary cosmopolitans evince a form of subjectivity that comprises all or most of the following attitudes. They are suspicious of nationalism, all forms of chauvinism, and even patriotism. They refuse to see the national economic and military interests of their country as more important