

Accommodating Cosmopolitanism

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I

David Hansen's essay "Walking with Diogenes" returns to beginnings, toward a consideration of "simple and obvious facts," and away from "the building of elaborate theories."¹ The movement of return takes two main forms. One is a return to origins, to Diogenes, the first known philosopher to invoke the idea of cosmopolitanism; the other is a return to the rough ground of everyday life and practices. Hansen presents the essay as part of a larger project that rests on the hypothesis that "a cosmopolitan prism can call attention to substantiating features of the relation between teachers, students, and curriculum that often remain in the shadows." If it turns out that cosmopolitanism cannot accommodate or orient everyday human relations "on the ground," then the hypothesis fails, and the larger project is futile.

In the first movement of return, Hansen considers both the point of departure for a cosmopolitan attitude and what follows from it (where the notion of "following" refers both to the history of ideas and, I assume, to the conceptual and practical consequences of taking a cosmopolitan stance). Much of the richness of Hansen's historical account lies in the scholarly footnotes that chart the lines of Diogenes' influence over time. This first return is as disquieting as it is inspiring, for Diogenes epitomizes the very features of cosmopolitanism that make it untenable, or beyond the reach, at least, of those of us with limited inclination or capacity for the lonely heroics of living as exiles beyond the comforts and confines of society.

Inspired by Diogenes' way of life as a provocative gesture of human agency and armed with the thought that perhaps everyone needs an internal Diogenes, in the second movement of return, Hansen invites Diogenes — metaphorically — to come along as his ambulatory partner for the return toward simple and obvious facts, to the soil of the everyday. So we can expect Hansen to offer a descriptive account, rather than a normative account, but there *is* a normative project in the wings. The intention of Hansen's peripatetic excursion is to present the case for a more habitable and grounded kind of cosmopolitanism.

II

Does Hansen make a convincing case for a grounded, locally sensitive cosmopolitanism? If so, what are its prospects for illuminating educational practice? I shall not answer either of these questions directly; the form of Hansen's lecture resists so crass an approach. The lecture instead invites very different response genres, each accenting a different facet of its leanings. Here are examples of responses I considered, and abandoned:

- (a) A dialogue between Hansen and Diogenes, with me piping up from the sidelines. Or, perhaps, a dialogue for three (Hansen, Luise Prior McCarty, and me), with an additional three anarchic, badgering voices, representing each of our internal versions of Diogenes.

(b) An arid critical analysis of the argument, dismissing its many metaphors and literary devices as mere embellishments.

(c) A string of haiku, spare and simple, attentive to the moment, with full recognition of the cosmos in some small everyday event.

(d) A set of instructions to teachers on how to cultivate cosmopolitan sensitivities and on the importance of doing so.

(e) An invitation to Hansen to join me on another walk, not through the streets of ancient Athens or contemporary Montréal, but through parts of rural South Africa — where communities live with what Jonny Steinberg has called the “Three-Letter Plague” — to test another kind of ordinary, everyday soil for its prospects of growing cosmopolitan sensibilities.²

Instead, I raise some critical questions and tease out some implications for Hansen’s educational project. The questions pertain to the nature of Hansen’s project, particularly his conception of cosmopolitanism. What exactly is he up to? Some textual analysis of his essay is called for but, contrary to option (b) in my list of tempting response types, I do not propose to trash Hansen’s metaphors or to dismiss his use of literary devices as “mere” anything.

III

Hansen begins his “walk” with Diogenes with a guiding hypothesis:

[(1)] My hypothesis on our walks would be that cosmopolitan relation pertains directly to human culture. It is a term of art for, among other things, the ability to dwell meaningfully in a space of often paradoxical transition: of leaving *and* remaining home, of engaging the strange *and* the familiar, of witnessing *and* participating. (emphasis in original)

He elaborates: “[2] Cosmopolitan relation, or artfulness, involves discerning how and when to express openness to the new, and loyalty to the known, in the vicissitudes of everyday life.”

Consider these two extracts as definitions. Notice that what is being defined is not “cosmopolitanism,” but “cosmopolitan relation.” Throughout Hansen’s essay the adjective “cosmopolitan” (for example, “cosmopolitan accents,” “cosmopolitan relation,” “cosmopolitan prism,” “cosmopolitan disposition,” “cosmopolitan sensitivity,” and “cosmopolitan orientation”) occurs more frequently than the noun “cosmopolitanism.” The noun carries all the weight of elaborate theory building, and Hansen is interested in a turn away from theory building, toward the rough ground of the everyday.

Extract (2) sounds very much like what Martha Nussbaum and David Wiggins have called “situational appreciation,” the bedrock of practical wisdom.³ Discernment in two dimensions, with respect to timing and manner — when and how to act in response to the salient particulars of situations of action and practice — is central both to Nussbaum’s account of perception and to Hansen’s account of cosmopolitan relation. Hansen calls this discernment “artfulness,” which he offers as a synonym for cosmopolitan relation. But if cosmopolitan relation is the same as artfulness, then what is gained by introducing “cosmopolitan relation” as a term of art? Is Hansen trying to stipulate terms so that — like Humpty Dumpty — he can make them mean

whatever he wants, and thus drive his intellectual project directly to its desired end? Surely not. Rather, what seems to be at stake here is more akin to programmatic definition, where a term of art marks out the terrain for a substantial, multifaceted investigation, whose end is a normative account of a practice, or set of practices, and its enabling conditions.

Bernard Williams's book *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* comes to mind as a sustained example of the use of terms of art in this way.⁴ The book pivots on two terms of art, Sincerity and Accuracy, which Williams capitalizes to mark their status. They are Williams's commodious terms for two central sets of dispositions that play a role in securing the background conditions for trust, namely, those qualities that people display "in wanting to know the truth, in finding it out, and in telling it to other people."⁵ In Williams's genealogy, Sincerity and Accuracy are virtues because they are deep aspects of character and ethical outlook.

Is Hansen doing something of the same kind here? Apparently, he *does* intend cosmopolitanism as a disposition or quality of character, among other things. Phrases like "cosmopolitan disposition," "cosmopolitan sensibility," and "cosmopolitan orientation" all point to this intention. "Cosmopolitan accents" may not be of the same order, but let us put this aside and run with the dispositional trail.

IV

Assuming that Hansen is interested in cosmopolitanism primarily as a kind of disposition, can it be classified as what Amélie Rorty calls a tropic disposition?⁶ Tropic dispositions are magnetizing: "they organize perceptions of situations so as to elicit appropriate habits and actions," and lead a person "to gravitate to the sort of situations that predictably elicit prized traits."⁷ Dispositions, tropic or not, are habits of seeing and doing, with typical preoccupations and patterns of action that are at least partly engendered by social structures and culturally shaped psychological traits. Social and political practices, the specific history and demography of a community, as well as its current condition and history of poverty or plenty, disease or health, may support very different dispositional configurations among the members of a community, and may result in the prizing of some traits and their forms of expression over others.⁸

Hansen's brief account of the presence of a cosmopolitan disposition in some unexpected times and places is meant to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism, as he conceives it, is possible in the everyday and ordinary practices of any society. Perhaps so, but surely place makes a crucial difference as to whether and how cosmopolitanism is possible; as well as to its range and styles of expression, to the agents who can and do take up a cosmopolitan stance, and to the agents among whom a cosmopolitan relation is possible — say, between teachers and students; among students and among teachers; and between teachers, students, and the subjects they learn about. A larger task for Hansen, I think, is to consider the ways in which different kinds of places open or close possibilities for cultivating cosmopolitanism and, especially, to consider whether, as a matter of institutional form or the material conditions of a community or culture, some places are barren or hostile soil for

cultivating openness to the new or strange. To set the task as a question: What kinds of places elicit and support “the ability to dwell meaningfully in a space of often paradoxical transition: of leaving *and* remaining home, of engaging the strange *and* the familiar, of witnessing *and* participating” and what kinds of places prohibit or discourage the display or development of this “ability”? It’s not a question that Hansen can ditch with impunity. To do so would be to refuse the very purpose of his project, namely, a return to the rough ground of the ordinary and the everyday. The ordinary and the everyday are not everywhere the same.

V

But let us walk without your famed lantern, with which you hoped to catch an honest face. The light it casts may be too harsh, putting into the shadows the gestures of the everyday and the ordinary, which constitute the only soil in which cosmopolitan relation between people can grow.

Hansen uses the conceit of walking with Diogenes as a mark of respect for Diogenes’ embodied philosophy. The conceit is apt in more ways than one. Walking is not just embodied but also emplaced; we walk in and through places even when, in a state of reverie, we notice little of where we walk. Also, walking is transitional — between here and there, this place and that — even when our wandering is aimless. Beyond the familiar tradition of the *flâneur* is another literary tradition, where observant walking reveals the cosmos in the ever changing ordinary. Consider the vagabond poet, Santoka Taneda, a drunkard and outcast (much like Diogenes) whose haiku, spare and simple, attend to the moment, recognizing the cosmos in small, everyday events along the road.⁹

One educational lesson that Hansen takes from his walk with Diogenes concerns the self-discipline that teachers and students cultivate in readying themselves for education. It strikes me that this has more to do with Diogenes as a moral exemplar than with cosmopolitanism *per se*. Through Hansen’s reconstruction of Diogenes’ embodied philosophy, we have a picture not only of a radically incomplete and thoroughly uninhabitable cosmopolitanism but also of a figure that can inspire us as a moral exemplar. Santoka, too, may be taken as a troubling exemplar of human agency that defies convention. Yet his haiku cast a more compassionate light on the world than does the harsh light of Diogenes’ lantern and they display more clearly the “ability to dwell meaningfully” in the “space of paradoxical transition” of “engaging the strange and the familiar.”

The moral exemplar of Diogenes has two important dimensions for education: its provocative gesture of human agency and critical consciousness; and the cultivated self-discipline (*askesis*) that is required for weathering life’s vicissitudes with integrity.

VI

In the version of my response to Hansen that I delivered in Montréal, I ended by asking: “Where today is the Diogenes of the Philosophy of Education Society?” Here, I ask: what “substantiating features” of education does a “cosmopolitan prism” bring to attention? Hansen does not answer directly. Reading signs along the route he walks with Diogenes, I think he means that the conditions for educational

practice, and its constitutive ends, require teachers and students to occupy an uneasy space not only between the strange and familiar, but also in relation to one another, their subjects of study, and the world at large. Just so.

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1. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark, 1985), 1.
 2. Jonny Steinberg, *Three-Letter Plague: A Young Man's Journey Through a Great Epidemic* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2008).
 3. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
 4. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).
 5. *Ibid.*, 7.
 6. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *Mind in Action: Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).
 7. *Ibid.*, 316.
 8. This quick sketch of dispositions and their social context draws on Amélie Rorty's account of virtues. See especially *Ibid.*, 269, 300–01, and 314–99.
 9. Santoka Taneda, *Mountain Tasting: Zen Haiku*, trans. John Stevens (Boston: Weatherly, 1980).