Introduction: Smith’s oikeiōsis

The idea of the *kosmou politēs* is very old, dating back at least to the ancient Stoics. But the idea that we might inhabit a realm beyond our own particular clans, nations, and states has re-emerged at various points throughout history, and with particular salience at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Cosmopolitanism has become a signifier of our times – the word is everywhere – though it has come to mean many things. The description “cosmopolitan” evokes a lifestyle that is enlightened, urban and worldly, one able to navigate the languages, tastes and cultures of the world’s great cities with ease and panache. For many Americans the word conjures up images of Helen Gurley Brown’s ideal of the independent, liberated “Cosmo” woman of the 1970s, an image reinvented for the 1990s in the wildly successful HBO television series “Sex in the City” and its celebration of “girl talk” over a pink martini-like libation known as a Cosmopolitan. The Cosmo woman’s independence consisted in thinking for herself, experiencing her sexuality, and moving through the world loosened from the stifling conventions of domesticity and submissive femininity.

In modern ethical discourse, from Immanuel Kant to Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah, the cosmopolitan ideal has embodied an imperative that we think for ourselves, that we become increasingly conscious of why we do what we do, that we resist giving ourselves over wholly to the conventions of time and place. *Sapere aude* – “dare to know” – Kant urged us, because one must cultivate independence of mind, or what Kant called “maturity,” before one can recognize one’s place in a larger, universal human community and begin the rational process of expanding the scope of one’s moral concern beyond the confines and prejudices of place which are accidental, arbitrary and morally irrelevant from a cosmopolitan perspective.¹

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Of course practitioners of identity politics and communitarians of diverse and colorful stripes promptly rejected the resurgence of ethical cosmopolitanism in the 1990s for this very reason – that in emphasizing our membership in a universal/cosmopolis, it seems to ask us to deny the earthy texture of our political, social and cultural selves; that it is thus too rationalist, too smug and imperialist, or perhaps just too optimistic for so flawed a species as we.² An entire “anti-cosmopolitan” – or perhaps “new cosmopolitan” – literature has cropped up in the last decade oriented around such challenges.³

Many who are troubled by the ethical cosmopolitan denial of particularity but who are nevertheless, in David Hollinger’s words, “determined to maximize species consciousness, to fashion tools for understanding and acting upon problems of a global scale, to diminish suffering regardless of colour, class, religion, sex and tribe,” have attempted to reconceptualize a non-foundationalist or “postmetaphysical” cosmopolitanism, one with a weak or minimalist ontology, that seeks bridges while simultaneously affirming deep diversity and the integrity of cultural identity.⁴ Others have sought to reframe the debate altogether, noting that identity itself has become complex and fragmented in our age of information, mobility and commodification. We are “mixed-up selves” living in a “mixed-up world,” Jeremy Waldron writes (of himself), and conventional categories of culture and cosmopolitanism therefore no longer suit us very well.⁵ Conceptualizing the intellectual landscape between reactionary localism and vapid universalism, between

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² Martha Nussbaum emphasizes repeatedly that the cosmopolitan project does not entail that we surrender our “local identifications, which can be a source of great richness in life.” She embraces a “concentric” model of Stoic cosmopolitanism for this reason. See notably Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism (Boston: Beacon, 1996), pp. 3–17; and Martha Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³ The first and perhaps defining debate was presented in Martha Nussbaum et al., “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” Boston Review, October/November 1994; condensed Nussbaum, Love of Country.


“Jihad” and “McWorld” as Benjamin Barber put it, is where the debate in ethical cosmopolitanism has landed today, and it shows no real sign of resolving or slowing.\(^6\)

But cosmopolitan debate is not limited to questions about ethics and culture. Cosmopolitanism has taken more explicitly political directions too, connected more or less overtly with the universalist ethical project associated with Kant. Political theorists influenced by Jürgen Habermas and his theory of communicative action are concerned less with identity or the scope and substance of our duties \textit{per se}, and more with democratic procedures for talking about these things among others in a global setting. Cosmopolitan democrats like David Held, Daniele Archibugi, Andrew Linklater, Richard Falk and many others (the literature is flourishing) stress the superiority of democratic values to any particular ethnic conception of identity or nationality, and seek to expand democratic discourse ethics and institutions to the international realm – an agenda which a range of communitarian and identity-oriented critics have dismissed as presumptuous and imperialistic, and an implausible and potentially dangerous aspiration for world governance.\(^7\)

Despite the vast and contentious ways that cosmopolitanism is articulated, re-articulated and challenged, however, one thing is very clear. Just as no early twentieth-century thinker would have neglected the impact of Marxism on the world, and no post-war thinker the impact of totalitarianism, we are all reflecting today on the directions that cosmopolitan currents are carrying individuals, groups, societies and states. We are dizzy with the pace of changes taking place around us, and are first beginning to make some sense of it. I have come to believe that Adam Smith’s moral psychology has something to say to us today as we work to sort it out.

\textit{Smith’s oikeiōsis}

Given the explosion of scholarship on Smith’s thought in recent years, at the very moment that global and cosmopolitan issues have come to dominate public consciousness and academic discourse in the humanities and social sciences, it is surprising that we have no substantial interpretation of Smith’s project impossible for Waldron. Focusing on the reasons beneath cultural practices, and the accessibility of such reasons, Waldron ultimately aligns himself with the Kantian orientation and against the “practitioners of identity politics.”\(^6\)


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moral philosophy for a global age.\(^8\) What might it mean, for example, to extend his well-known ideas of “sympathy” and “spectorship” to distant strangers?\(^9\) Or to characterize his international political economy as “cosmopolitan”?\(^10\) Or in a global context to say that Smith’s jurisprudence has universal significance?\(^11\) On reflection, it turns out that Adam Smith is an insightful participant in the ongoing debates about cosmopolitanism – what it is, what it assumes, what it can and cannot do.

In the vast and ever expanding sea of Smith scholarship, we have no interpretation of Smith that rigorously considers his thoughts about distance and proximity in the Theory of Moral Sentiments – that pays serious and central attention to the question of spatial distance in his moral philosophy.\(^12\) This book is the first study to illuminate the spatial texture of Smith’s

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\(^9\) One frequently sees Smith’s moral psychology invoked (and distorted) in literatures seeking to assert humanitarian and cosmopolitan duties toward distant strangers. For a particularly distorted example, which also happens to disfigure some of my own work, see Page, Peace Education, pp. 136–139. Two far worthier examples are Boltanski, Distant Suffering, which uses Smith’s impartial spectator model to generate a humanitarian “politics of pity”; and Sen, “Impartiality,” which emphasizes the global and cross-cultural significance of Smith’s impartial spectator model. I will engage both at some length.


thought, and to put him into direct conversation with global ethics discourse. I address Smith’s place in the long-standing debates over cosmopolitanism, which were perhaps as vibrant in the eighteenth century as they are in our own. Specifically, I argue here that Smith’s thoughts about care and judgment operate within remarkably narrow spatial limits. He argued (a) that our natural “beneﬁcence” tends to fade as its object becomes further and further removed from the spectatorial center; and distinctly (b) that our judgments of others become less and less reliable as a justiﬁcation for action or intervention. Understanding the spatial texture of Smith’s thought will help clarify how both the moral psychology of care and the epistemology of moral judgment worked for him. My book ultimately reﬂects on the localist implications that ﬂow from Smith’s orientation to space, demonstrates serious problems with enlisting the Moral Sentiments ﬂatly for ethical cosmopolitan purposes, but ultimately points toward other resources in his thought, largely neglected in this context, for cultivating a twenty-ﬁrst-century global ethics.

Those familiar with eighteenth-century European moral philosophy will detect a Humean sensibility in my assertion that Smith’s thought operates within narrow spatial limits. David Hume famously observed that “sympathy … is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous.” Smith too believed that we tend naturally to connect affectively with those who are nearby or familiar to us, and that this connection tends to fade, become more tenuous, as an object becomes more “remote.” Much will be said here about Hume’s inﬂuence on Smith’s way of thinking about distance, though I argue that Smith’s account is richer and ultimately more provocative for us today. One of Smith’s essential contributions beyond Hume, I argue, is that distance is a more complex and layered concept for him. It was not merely a physical concept. Smith approached distance in affective and cultural/historical terms as well – which means that I may be remote from someone sitting just before me, or close to someone across the globe. In this sense, Smith provides a framework for thinking in fresh ways about new sorts of human connection that emerge in a global age, for reﬂecting on what William Connolly has recently called “eccentric” connections that emerge in an age of speed and compressed distance – “crosscutting allegiances” that

My thanks to Patchen Markell for ﬁrst encouraging me to clarify the differences in Smith’s thought between care and judgment.

David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), p. 49. In this passage, Hume used the word “sympathy” to mean other-concern, while Smith used the term “sympathy” very differently and distinctively to denote a general “fellow-feeling” with any passion whatsoever. I explore these differences later.
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“exceed,” “complicate” and often “compromise” the concentric connections of place that governed in ages when people lived slow, local lives.\(^1\)

Moreover, Smith defined sympathy very differently than did Hume, so that distance and proximity played a different role in his thought. Sympathy for Smith was not about other-regarding a distance and proximity played a different role in his thought. Sympathy for Smith was primarily a principle of judgment and was impacted in very complex ways by the cultural, affective and physical proximity of the person or object being judged.

My case here rests on situating Smith’s thoughts about distance in the Moral Sentiments in another much older context which very likely situated Hume’s thoughts too. Here I emphasize ancient Stoic ethics, and specifically the Stoic idea of oikeiōsis, popularized by the second century CE Stoic, Hierocles, whose surviving fragments figure prominently in the writings of the fifth-century Macedonian anthologist Joannes Stobaeus – though the idea of oikeiōsis was most likely made known to Smith and the Scots generally through their familiarity with Cicero’s De Officiis. The influence of Stoicism on Adam Smith’s moral and political thought is widely appreciated, and has been given extensive treatment by the editors of the Glasgow edition of the Moral Sentiments, by Norbert Waszek, Vivienne Brown, Peter Clarke and most recently Gloria Vivenza, Leonidas Montes and Martha Nussbaum.\(^6\) The Stoic dimension of Adam Smith’s thought is apparent to

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even the most casual reader of the *Moral Sentiments*, for Smith spoke at great length about the Stoic project, about the elements of Stoicism that attracted him and those that he rejected. Throughout the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith regularly enlisted Stoic sources, mainly the *Discourses* of Epictetus, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, and less frequently, Cicero’s *De Officiis* and *De Finibus* and Seneca’s *Epistles*. He concerned himself very little with Stoic logic, physics and metaphysics, but concentrated on what he took often rather selectively to be Stoic “moral philosophy.” Part VII of the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith’s catalogue of the great schools within the history of moral philosophy, contains an entire chapter on Stoicism.\(^{17}\) While he tended to think that the Stoic system was generally too rigorous in its demand for apathy toward life as lived by most people, he was nevertheless attracted to a moderated version of the Stoic idea of “self command,” which became, arguably, the central virtue in his own moral philosophy.\(^{18}\) In an extended discussion of self-command in Part VI Smith asserted that “Self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principle lustre.”\(^{19}\) As such, it is not altogether surprising that most interpretations of Smith’s Stoicism have focused on the prevalence of “self-command” and connected ideas in his thought. Many have also seized on the Stoic character of Smith’s providentialism, which runs through (some would say governs entirely) both his ethical and economic ideas. But comparatively little attention has been given to Smith’s cautious appropriation of the Stoic idea of *oikeiōsis*, which I have long found surprising given its direct relevance to contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism in moral philosophy, political theory and international ethics.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{17}\) TMS VII.ii.1 (pp. 267–314).  
\(^{18}\) See notably TMS VI.iii (pp. 237–262).  
\(^{19}\) TMS VI.iii.11 (p. 241).  
\(^{20}\) The notable exception here is Brown, *Discourse*, pp. 95–97. See also Montes, *Smith in Context*, p. 89, n. 62, who challenges Gloria Vivenza who (in *Smith and the Classics*) attributes Smith’s thinking about the degrees of fellowship to Peripatetic influences, and doubts that it is Stoic in origin. See also Montes, “Adam Smith as an Eclectic Stoic.” Just as I was completing this book, I discovered Levy and Peart, “The Evil of Independence.” Though they never use the concept explicitly, Levy and Peart contribute to our understanding of Smith’s *oikeiōsis* when they seek to “locate the foundations of Smith’s egalitarianism in Stoic cosmopolitanism” (p. 2).
The word oikeiōsis derives from the Greek root oikos, which referred in ancient democratic life to the private realm of the household as distinct from the public realm of the polis, each of which entailed a different science of management, oikonomeia and politika. Oikeiōsis was a Stoic extrapolation from the familiarity that develops over time among those who inhabit the oikos, among those who very literally share physical space. Most fully developed by Cicero and Hierocles, oikeiōsis was the notion that human affection weakens as it radiates outward in degrees from the self. Thus, the Stoics mapped our affections concentrically, arguing that our affections are strongest at the center, closest and most familiar to the self, and that they weaken progressively as an object is removed further and further away. Imagine a dart board. According to Stoic oikeiōsis, the bullseye represents the self, the innermost ring represents one’s family (those literally within the oikos), the next ring one’s friends, the next one’s neighbors, then one’s tribe or community, then one’s country, and so on; and ultimately the outermost and largest ring encompasses all of humanity. Surely, what determines the ordering of the circles, who will be regarded as “close,” will vary with the kinship patterns in any particular culture.21 But the process would seem to be a universal one for the ancient Stoics: human affection and care are ordered spatially around the self in a concentric pattern.

A central proposition in my interpretation here is that Smith’s appropriation of Stoic oikeiōsis was conflicted and incomplete. He wholly embraced oikeiōsis as an empirical fact, as an accurate description of the concentric structure of human affection and care. Indeed, we will see that he organized his entire discussion of natural beneficence – of the natural “distribution of our good offices” – in Moral Sentiments VI.ii in concentric terms, mirroring the Stoic argument in remarkably precise detail. But while he embraced Stoic oikeiōsis as an empirical fact, as an accurate account of how human affection works, he decisively rejected Stoic cosmopolitan teleology which sought to overcome man’s nature concentrically understood. Smith refused to follow the Stoic argument to its cosmopolitan conclusion that rational agents must cultivate “apathy” toward the near and dear, learn to resist oikeiōsis (the natural affection born of familiarity), to collapse the circles, and become “citizens of the world.” In his engagement with Stoic teleology, then, Smith was distinctively anti-cosmopolitan.

21 On this, see Margaret Chatterjee’s fascinating discussion of Hierocles, Smith and Gandhi in “Oceanic Circle,” p. 151. My thanks to Lloyd Rudolph for sending me Chatterjee’s book just as I was finishing my own, prompting me, as he always does, to reflect on Smith’s ideas outside of an Anglophone context.
Smith’s oikeiōsis

The concentric model of ethical concern developed in Stoic thought has become something of a commonplace in ethics discourse today, and a centerpiece of the cosmopolitan agenda. In 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson published his essay “Circles,” which portrayed human life as a “self-evolving circle which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.”22 Not long after, historian W. E. H. Lecky drew on Emerson’s metaphor of concentricity, and conceived of moral progress as an expansion of ethical responsibility, as an “expanding circle” with the individual and its intimates residing at the center, but which “soon … includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity.”23 Lecky’s formulation is so well known today that it is frequently invoked by intellectuals and practitioners as “Lecky’s Circle.”24 Peter Singer’s Expanding the Circle is a particularly well-known appropriation of Lecky’s vision.25 And this concentric way of thinking about our ethical duties is diffused throughout twentieth-century thought. Note for example Albert Einstein’s “circle of compassion”:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.26

Something very similar is at work in Gandhi’s late political thought. Margaret Chatterjee recently explored affinities between Hierocles’ circles and Gandhi’s idea of the “oceanic circle,” even noting important parallels with concentric themes in Emerson, Lecky and Adam Smith, all of whom Gandhi read with care.27 In an editorial of April 1946 Gandhi wrote this:

Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the

24 See, for example, James Bacchus, “Lecky’s Circle: Thoughts from the Frontier of International Law,” address to the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London, April 10, 2003.
27 Chatterjee, “Oceanic Circle.”
village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, til at last the whole becomes one life comprised of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outermost circle will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and will derive its own strength from it.  

A few things stand out in this passage. Note the profound difference between the “centre” of Gandhi’s oceanic circle and the isolated, selfish individual who tends to reside at the center of Western appropriations of the Stoic model. Gandhi’s center is an individual who is richly embedded in his village which, as Chatterjee points out, demonstrates how vastly different the concentric layout will look in cultures with different kinship patterns. To a Western sensibility, an individual who is already ready to sacrifice himself to the village is a perplexing center, a foreign starting point. But for Gandhi the problem was not to overcome egoism in the Western sense, but to address tensions between tribe and nation, between local identity and a larger sense of unity organized around the idea of “India.” Finally, Gandhi is not concerned in this particular passage with expanding concern to all of humanity (though of course this was essential to his overall vision). For him the “oceanic circle” confronted political problems internal to India. Gandhi rejected the conventional options of either state centralization, which is pyramid shaped and oppressive, or decentralized fragmentation, which is shapeless, and would undermine Indian unity. The oceanic circle was a device for navigating this tension between local self-determination and holistic unity. Gandhi inspires some very interesting thoughts about how we might use the circles to expand human connection, but in a way that respects the integrity of the inner-most circles – self, family, village.

Today the circles are perhaps most readily associated with Martha Nussbaum’s extensive work on cosmopolitanism, which draws frequently on the Stoic model to tamp down parochial self-preference and expand our ethical concern. She argues that we “should work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality; and give the circle that defines our humanity special attention and respect.”

19 For an interesting discussion of the “moral circles” in Chinese thought, see The Moral Circles and the Self: Chinese and Western Approaches, ed. Kim-chong Chong, Sor-hoon Tan and C. L. Ten (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003). Unfortunately, the book situates Adam Smith within a Western tradition that sees the individual as “isolated” and “egoistic” (p. xviii).