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## Cosmopolitanism and Rationalizing Tendencies

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## Cosmopolitanism and Rationalizing Tendencies

### Abstract

When phone-in talk shows, the press, and undergraduates debate the case for cosmopolitan accounts of global distributive justice, there are a number of standard rationalizations given for why we don't have a duty to help. These include: "we have duties only to our fellow countrymen"; "poverty is caused by corrupt leaders, so not our fault, and therefore not our responsibility"; and "humanitarian aid is counter-productive." Unlike the other two sorts of rationalization, the latter claim does not necessarily deny the moral cosmopolitanism premise that we have extensive duties to relieve the suffering of those beyond our borders. Rather, it follows that good cosmopolitans shouldn't give aid because doing so will violate the negative duty not to harm others, including those in other states. Yet I think we ought to be wary of this claim, given what Thomas Pogge calls our "rationalizing tendencies." That is, we often interpret our moral values and empirical judgments in our own favor. Consider, for instance, the frequent flyer who convinces herself that global warming is exaggerated in order to excuse her own significant carbon footprint. Claims of dependency by the "new colonialists" may fall into the same category. They provide a convenient excuse for individuals not to support aid agencies and international charities—our donations and support are only going to worsen the situation of those needing help anyway.

### Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian aid, Colonialism, Development

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## Cosmopolitanism and Rationalizing Tendencies

by James Pattison

When phone-in talk shows, the press, and undergraduates debate the case for cosmopolitan accounts of global distributive justice, there are a number of standard rationalizations given for why we don't have a duty to help. These include: "we have duties only to our fellow countrymen"; "poverty is caused by corrupt leaders, so not our fault, and therefore not our responsibility"; and "humanitarian aid is counter-productive." Unlike the other two sorts of rationalization, the latter claim does not necessarily deny the moral cosmopolitanism premise that we have extensive duties to relieve the suffering of those beyond our borders. Rather, it follows that good cosmopolitans shouldn't give aid because doing so will violate the negative duty not to harm others, including those in other states. Yet I think we ought to be wary of this claim, given what [Thomas Pogge](#) calls our "[rationalizing tendencies](#)." That is, we often interpret our moral values and empirical judgments in our own favor. Consider, for instance, the frequent flyer who convinces herself that global warming is exaggerated in order to excuse her own significant carbon footprint. Claims of dependency by the "new colonialists" may fall into the same category. They provide a convenient excuse for individuals not to support aid agencies and international charities—our donations and support are only going to worsen the situation of those needing help anyway.

To be sure, allegations of donor dependency may have some substance and, as such, be more than simply selfish rationalizations. But it is questionable how much *significance* we should give to this problem. It is important to remember that what ultimately matters is the effective provision of vital services, such as education and healthcare. This is not to deny that donors acting on cosmopolitan sentiments should be aware of the potentially detrimental effects of their beneficence. More specifically, aid agencies and other benefactors should take steps to help secure the accountability and long-term sustainability of the services that they provide. My point, however, is that dependency seems, by comparison, a minor complaint when what is at stake is the provision of services that are inextricably linked to the basic health and welfare of citizens.

The provision of these services can be said to be cosmopolitan not only in a *moral* sense—fulfilling duties to those beyond our boundaries—but also in the *political* sense of the term—the agents that provide the services are non-state, global actors. Some may feel uneasy about the growing influence of such cosmopolitan agents, but we should not romanticize the system of states. Those that revere the state often view it as the ultimate political community. It should be strong, the argument runs, and political leaders should be free to make their own decisions without external influence. The obvious problem with this perspective is that it takes the state to be a "black box": what goes on within it is no one else's problem. And, on this view, aid that can help the state's people but harm the state is problematic. This gets things the wrong way round. As most modern, liberal conceptions of the state tell us, the state exists to provide for its citizens. It follows that if cosmopolitan agents can provide basic services that better secure people's needs than then the weak state, so much for the state.

It is perhaps inevitable that the services provided by cosmopolitan agents will lead to allegations of dependency. This may be testament to the job that some of them are doing: they're providing effective services that people want to use. It is also perhaps inevitable that their presence will give rise to accusations of being "new colonialists." However, we should not let the pejorative language of colonialism lead us to forget that what matters is securing people's basic needs, and not let dependency provide us with another convenient rationalization for why we don't do anything wrong when we choose not to help those less fortunate than ourselves.

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