

Cosmopolitanism vs. Statism: Issues with Modern Ethical Distribution Models and their Impact on Interplanetary Relations

Brandon Kyle Canty, advised by Dr. Carlos Mariscal

University of Nevada, Reno, Department of Philosophy

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Abstract: What was once discussed only in the context of science fiction is now being brought to the forefront of astrobiological conversation. Scientists are working around the planet to discover extraterrestrial life. There has been much discussion about the technological and habitation limitations of humanity in space. However, there have been far fewer discussions of the cultural, political and moral expectations of disempowerment that humans could have as new members in interplanetary society. If we were to stumble upon a colony of space aliens tomorrow, there is no strong guarantee that we would be welcomed by alternative species with open arms. For most of human history, the way that we have understood alien life has been largely anthropocentric (Shostak, 2015). However, if we are going to survive in the climate not just physically, but politically, we will also need to examine the ethics and applicability of our distributive justice models. In this paper, I will examine two common systems of distributive justice and talk about the implications of translational models for each system based on our political and economic standing in the context of interplanetary opportunities. My goal is not to make a general statement about which system might be better when engaging with extraterrestrial life, nor is it to state what our ethical decisions ought to be. Rather, it is to highlight issues that could arise in specific and hypothetical situations because of scaling distributive systems from being used in a global community to an interplanetary one.

Defining Statism

There are many different interpretations of statism as a concept for distributive justice. However, I'm going to focus on Michael Blake's description of statism as laid out in *Global Political Theory*. According to Blake, statism is an interpretation of moral equality in which people who share liability to a common state owe each other justice (Blake, 2016). One of the key features of the statist model is that goods must be distributed within the state first before distributive considerations can be made for other states. It is noteworthy that statism doesn't have a unified definition. For example, Blake's version of statism has ethically gray areas concerning the distribution of goods outside of states whereas Thomas Nagel expresses in *The Problem*

of Global Justice that there are no duties of justice toward non-citizens (Nagel, 2005). It is also noteworthy that in the case of Blake, all states are associations of people who gather their shared importance to each other from their shared culture and community. This is to say that, without communities, people lose their sense of connection to each other and the problems of their state.

Defining Cosmopolitanism

Like statism, some variation in the definition of cosmopolitanism does exist. For example, John Rawls's second principle of justice holds that the equity of distribution for wealth, income and opportunity are a rough approximation of global justice for cosmopolitan purposes (Rawls, 1971).

Conversely, Amartya Sen criticizes Rawls for not addressing more personal qualities of justice, such as whether an individual is or is not abled bodied and how that affects their ability to function in the context of society (Sen, 2018). However, I will be covering the work of Darrel Moellendorf, who defines cosmopolitanism generally by stating that global inequalities such as wealth, health and education are inherently unjust. Moellendorf holds that the moral principles of cosmopolitanism apply to all people situated in a morally relevant way and that a person's entitlements should not be determined by arbitrary factors like citizenship.

In this manner, his cosmopolitanism is more applicable in providing rights of justice to alien life. It is more malleable in that it has a layer of egalitarian influence that the statist view does not share because of the borders that are created by generating states. The inclusive nature and the equal importance for distributive justice, regardless of culture, translates better to interplanetary trade with other beings in a way statism does not.

The Issue of Cultural Differences

One of the major issues in defining the worthiness of extraterrestrial life for the purposes of distributive justice is the idea of differences in culture. Even in the context of human societies, cultural differences can have a massive impact on how people distribute goods globally and locally because of how cultures affect people's values. For example, a study in *The Journal of Social Psychology* explored the impact of cross-cultural values of different levels of neediness versus merit and how the values in different countries affected the choices that people made in distributing wealth. The experiment used a pool of participants from the U.S. (who tend to have values more closely associated with a meritocracy) against Turkish participants (who share a greater level of interconnectedness) (Murphy-Berman A, Berman J, & Cukur S, 2012). They gave participants from both the U.S. and Turkey the task to assess the fairness of a manager's decision on how to distribute a \$200 pool of money for employees. The goal was to assess how individuals with different cultural values would rate the credibility of the manager's decision. They found that individuals from the U.S. were more likely to give a higher rate of fairness for managers who gave a greater bonus based upon merit while Turkish students rated managerial

bonuses as fair when their decisions were based upon need.

This study demonstrated that human beings fundamentally struggle with accepting cultural values that are not their own. In dealing with interplanetary distribution and needs assessment, human beings will need to address our issues with moral systems that we do not agree with. If we are going to create a system of distributive justice that is robust enough to survive the boundaries of space and the multitude of potential moral values that could exist between interplanetary cultures, then it will need to be a system that is founded upon a strong set of core values that transcend our individual or local moral values.

The Difficulty of Definition

Now we might wonder, why should we care about the definition of life in the context of an ethical discussion? After all, can we not simply say that we are ethically beholden to populations who appear life-like? Could we not simply see a living organism and agree that we owe it ethical consideration based on its behavior? To this response, I would say perhaps we could, but it would not be without its problems. For example, there are many instantiations within the history of the world where people have been treated unethically based upon their behavior (the African slave trade is an example of this). I firmly hold that we must develop some type of criterion for life to consider ethical distribution because without one we could both overlook populations that are deserving of ethical distribution and to do that would be in and of itself an unethical decision.

The central issue with defining life is two-fold. The first issue is there is no universal definition of life. The second, potentially more complex issue, is that many of the ways in which we define life are science-based and not ethics-based. Dr. Lucas Mix addressed this issue at the 2018 conference on *Social and Conceptual Issues in Astrobiology* (Mix, 2018). Many of our conceptualizations of life are based on how an organism functions or its ability to evolve. However, from a distributive justice perspective, these definitions are too weak because they are based solely on our understanding of life as we know it on our planet and make no exceptions for otherwise intelligent beings with moral principles

whose existence neither functions or has evolved like our own.

As Chyba and Cleland point out in defining life, one of the most widely accepted definitions for life is that of Darwin, who describes life as a chemical system that evolves (Cleland & Chyba, 2002). However, distributive justice does not base its value of life on scientific principles. Its only metric for worthiness is derived from the idea of an inherent and necessary moral obligation to people. Unfortunately, the same principle of valuing people that makes the idea so powerful also causes problems in an interplanetary setting. It forces us to ask the question: if all humans are people, is it necessary that all people be humans?

If we only defined life using Darwin's principles, we leave ourselves to exclude a potentially massive set of non-evolving planetary life forms of equal moral standing and intelligence which have inconceivable biological systems entirely different from our own. Furthermore, we would be forced away from using a cosmopolitan system and into a statist system because there would be a conflict created by dividing ourselves by virtue of what defines us as a state of people who evolve and have chemical systems and the egalitarian nature that an interplanetary cosmopolitan would force upon us (provided that there were species we could be morally obligated to who are biologically different from us).

Scaling the Systems

We must now understand how the ethics of cosmopolitan and statist ethics might be applied in interplanetary distributive considerations. By scaling I mean how might we apply the system of distributive justice as a collection of basic principles to a distributive system much larger than that for which it was initially intended upon its conception. If we look at the basic ethical values of statism and cosmopolitanism, we can scale them from a global political ethical system to an interplanetary political ethical system (and thus a system that helps us determine how goods ought to be distributed between planetary lives) based on the values that statist and cosmopolitans hold. However, upon inspection of these two systems, we run into immediate problems.

First, both systems are written entirely from an anthropocentric viewpoint and are solely dedicated to the betterment of other people. While

cosmopolitanism might be able to circumvent this problem by saying that we have an obligation to citizenships (interplanetary or otherwise), it still does not address the boundaries of what a citizenship is from an interplanetary perspective. Therefore, to apply a statist or cosmopolitan system at an interplanetary scale, we must either state absolutely that we have an ethical obligation to all forms of life (even forms we do not understand or do not fully meet our definitions expectations of life) or we must create a definition of life that is either so rigid that very few species would qualify or so vague that it would be as though no definition existed at all (thus returning to the nature of the first solution).

Distance, Distribution and Disruption

When addressing issues that are built into distributive justice on an interplanetary scale, there are several important factors. The issue of distance (ensuring that any goods promised can be received), the issue of distribution (who we give priority to and when) and the issue of disruption (do we exact injustices upon those we aim to help or ourselves by helping one species over another).

Distance plays an important factor, especially when considering a system like cosmopolitanism, since cosmopolitan distributive justice does not establish the physical boundaries that statism does. In a case where we could establish that a non-human species ought to be privy to some form of distributive justice (in the form of goods), we have an ethical obligation to provide it. However, this principle is a double-edged sword because, by not drawing the boundaries as with statism, we are forced to propose two questions: at what distance, if any, could we say that we are not ethically obligated to assist an intelligent species? In other words, does cosmopolitan justice transcend spatial distance? If it is agreed upon that there is no distance where distributive justice becomes irrelevant and all intelligent beings should be considered equally entitled to distributive justice, how do we reconcile our own technological and financial limitations, knowing that we cannot feasibly help everyone equally despite their equal deserving with the understanding that we have a moral imperative to view those species as equally deserving as ourselves?

We then come to the issue of distribution. While cosmopolitan ethics is in some sense better at

dealing with the deservedness of what beings should receive goods, statism (according to Blake) holds that we have no moral obligation to beings outside our state at all. From a distribution perspective, this is a major issue with scaling statism. If we look at Earth as a large-form human state, then statism simply does not permit us to trade or distribute goods or even consider the question of whether there are beings on other planets that could deserve our help because our concern is first and foremost to the state. If this is the case, it renders the idea of establishing a political or ethical system with other intelligent life completely infeasible.

The last and most ethereal potential problem is that of disruption. This is indirectly tied into both the cultural values of potential extraterrestrial life and the fragile nature of our own economy. Simply put, we do not have any ethical models for the distribution of goods that do not account for an understanding of human culture because we as humans wrote these models and cannot conceive of the strangeness of space ethics. For example, at what point do we have an ethical obligation under cosmopolitan justice to help? If we found an incredibly desperate and persecuted group of aliens, much worse off than we on Earth in even the worst situations could conceive, existing in a state of living torture, do we have an obligation to help them knowing they are so far away even though we have intelligent beings living on earth who are experiencing very significant (albeit less severe) suffering?

Scaling Statism: Pros and Cons

The issue of scaling these systems becomes even more problematic when we engage with the political conflict that could arise from different cultures as they relate to interplanetary trade. For example, how would we as a people deal with the conflict that would result from engaging in trade between two warring planets, both of whom have a greater level of technology and weaponry than our own? The nature of distributive justice in statism might hold that we have a moral obligation to take care of the needs of our planet (state) first before giving into the demands of one outside of it. However, this might not be the most rational decision in an instance where choosing to disengage with trade could lead to our own destruction due to cultural misunderstanding. Unlike in the context of global

trade, we cannot simply enforce tariffs or threaten sanctions on different planetary nations without a well-established framework because we have no reason to believe that those agreements would be honored. Furthermore, if their culture is substantially different from ours, they might not understand the distinction between the threat of tariffs and the threat of a declaration of war. The tools that allow us to enforce state lines and demonstrate our own autonomy as nations simply might not work in space. The framework of our ethics has only ever been applied between two human nations of equal economic power (such as when the U.S. threatens China) or when a greater economic power coerces a lesser one (such as when the U.S. threatens Cuba).

In the case where humans have a greater arsenal than our adversaries and are threatened by outside enemies, statism gives us justification to ask the people of earth to act for the common goal of the betterment and safety of humankind (Blake, 2016). However, these rules of engagement will not work in a case where Earth has less bargaining power than the extra-planetary nation we aim to deny the distribution to, especially in the case where we make ourselves vulnerable to invasion and violation of our cultural norms. In fact, an argument could be made that expecting cultural norms to be accepted within the context of the interplanetary distribution of goods is not a rational act but one of blind faith. We have no guarantee that similar cultures will exist nor any strong evidence to support that they could. Therefore, I would argue that, while a statist view does offer some advantage by being more centered around the boundaries of Earth (thus providing a justification for why humans should have resource and financial priority over other planetary nations) and the cultural value of its citizens, it also has built a major flaw within that justification that could cause significant political conflict because of human-first values.

Scaling Cosmopolitanism: Pros and Cons

The model of cosmopolitanism leaves more room for a looser interpretation of what beings are deserving of distributive justice, especially in the case of its rules about citizenship. An interplanetary distributive system of cosmopolitan thought could be considered the more egalitarian approach between itself and statism (Moellendorf, 2016). If we were to create a system of interplanetary cosmopolitanism,

without creating the borders included in statism, the virtues of cosmopolitanism would put a greater emphasis on all life and thus have a greater probability in building strong relationships among ourselves and peaceful beings in space. The central problem with scaled cosmopolitanism is the resources on earth are, by comparison to those of the rest of the known universe, finite. By stating an ethical rule that Earth is obligated to distribute its resources with other planetary systems with equal import to ours and regardless of citizenship, we would open ourselves up to the reality of losing our already dwindling supply of resources.

There is no guarantee that the same courtesy will be extended to us. While the cosmopolitan conceptualization of distributive justice could insulate us to some degree from the potential cultural problems expressed by statism (cultural misunderstanding of the implication of tariffs and the resulting war) it still holds no promise that enemies who would have attempted to conquer us and take our resources will not do so anyways. In other words, it would make us look weak.

Why We Must Choose & Further Considerations

There are several criticisms that could be levied against me for my choice of writers like Blake and Moellendorf to create an explanandum for ethical considerations of human-like entities. One might argue that I would've better served my point in taking the theoretical stance of writers like Robert Garner who studies the rights of animals and ethical considerations for them. He has been critical of writers like Rawls whose ethical considerations fall strictly upon humans. (Garner, 2013) However, to this reader I would say that an idealized model of ethics does not serve me within the scope of this article. As they stand, our ethical considerations for animals as they are do not go nearly far enough as they could need to for the purpose of dealing with extraterrestrial life. My goal is not to focus on what ought to be, but to proceed from the understanding of how the world is now. I would also argue that his theory does not go far enough for the purposes of my discussion as it mainly focuses on reducing suffering, not the empowerment of non-human animals. Trade is a mechanism for mutual empowerment as well as the reduction of suffering for all parties involved.

My choice in Blake and Moellendorf was a calculation of simplicity. I believe the flaws of both

cosmopolitanism and statism to be derived not from the particulars of their application but from the core principles and beliefs implicit in their systems. Further, in the context of Earth, statism and cosmopolitanism are the two systems we see most commonly applied and discussed, with statism representing the global community (the lines drawn by nations) and cosmopolitanism representing the ethical ideal for many theorists. They are both practiced and valued by humans and thus are two of the most logical choices on which we might base a model of distributive justice in the case of trade. Furthermore, the reason we must choose a singular system as opposed to multiple systems is quite simple. To act ethically to the people of our own planet, a certain level of democracy is required. We wouldn't choose multiple systems of ethics because to do so causes nations (or other bodies with the capacity) to act in their own best interests. If Russia started an intergalactic trade war with an imagined planet using a system of ethics the rest of the world does not agree with, that planet might make no distinction on whom to hold responsible. By choosing an individual system as a planetary nation, we all have equal responsibility in the decisions that are made, and any consequences enforced upon us as a planet would be more just.

Goods, Opportunity and The Fermi Paradox

It might not seem obvious why I've included opportunity as a component of my ethical discussion. Particularly considering the hypothetical nature of extraterrestrial life, it is easy to inquire as to why we should even consider it as a component of our ethics. We might also ask what authorizes us to provide justice to other species. Succinctly, what gives us the right to meddle with the customs and cooperation of other planets? This is a fine assertion and one I wholeheartedly agree with in principle. However, we must realize that the process of discovering extraterrestrial life is already preceding. We are already exploring other planets.

Fermi's paradox states that there is a contradiction between the seeming lack of life in the universe and the unfathomable size of it, which should lead to its discovery. In other words, life should be everywhere, but we have yet to find it. It is not a question of whether we have the authority to enforce our ethics upon others. It is a question of whether the circumstances of intergalactic travel will require us to. Whether we have the authority or not,

we must consider what we will do in the event of extraordinary circumstances which means it is not enough to consider just the distribution of goods. We must also consider the ethical obligations we have to ourselves to keep the planet safe. In the face of a greater military power than our own, strong politics might be our best option. Therefore, opportunity becomes an ethical safety net we can use to protect ourselves from escalation of conflict, distributive or otherwise. We might stumble upon a planet that has resources that could end global hunger or cure cancer but without a distributive system based on the tenant of equitable ethical treatment for all, a species with such a precious resource might see our people as barbarous in nature and undeserving of help. Thus, we must be flexible in understanding how our ethical theories may or may not translate well in the cosmos.

A Conclusion on the Inconceivable

In the case of both statist and cosmopolitan justice, neither system of distributive justice has ever considered the defining qualities of personhood. Both systems hold that we owe some people in some manner some level of justice when determining their rights to goods. These goods can be material, opportunistic or monetary, but in all cases, there is some agreement that people, by their humanity, have a right to or have the opportunity for possession. However, if we are to imagine a system of distributive justice which is fair to both humans and non-humans, then we must have a system that addresses the cultural, definitional and systematic flaws that would separate our rights to justice from the rights of other life forms. If we cannot reach these goals concretely, then I would strongly suggest that humanity is not ready for the consequences of interplanetary distribution and trade.

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