

Appiah, Kwame Anthony:

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers

New York: Norton, 2007, Paperback, 224 S., \$ 15.95

The realm of economic ethics in general has recently attracted significant attention. But when it comes to the realm of international management, this is not true in the same sense. Although the discipline has significant practical importance—the field of practice is developing an extraordinary demand for orientation to direct us across the terrain of foreign cultures and societies—the specific debates about the development of some kind of ethics of world society have remained largely neglected. The question about the reason for this blind spot would itself be worth study. There are more than enough reasons for renewed thinking about the ethical foundations of cooperation in a globalized world, especially when it comes to the “arena” of economics. I would thus like to point a theoretical development in the realm of the ethics that might be of use to an applications-oriented discipline like that of international personnel management.

In *Cosmopolitanism*, Anthony Appiah has written a notable book not directed at an expert audience of philosophers. Instead, his book is addressed at the general reader interested in “world citizenship”. It develops a notion of cosmopolitanism as a program, not as a closed theory, which on the one hand maintains the notion of universal values, defending them vehemently against relativism, while at the same time demanding respect for legitimate differences. Two goals that often collide in theory and practice.

To find a solution to the problem, Appiah argues on two levels against a positivism that has established itself as a kind of common sense. On the one hand, the author undertakes an attempt to rehabilitate values as instructive standards in society. His central argument: if we want to understand the function of values, we should not foreground their function as guidelines for individual action, but take account of the fact that values direct the actions of individuals that share their lives with one another. In this context, the author does not take recourse to older formulations from functionalist sociology, but uses concepts from a more recent philosophy of language. Normative concepts are communicated through value-laden terms, and normative language is an instrument for the mutual coordination of social life. Values are inserted into social practices like music, poetry, and dance, marriage and the burial of the dead. The commonalities of our *conditio humana* result in values like generosity and mutuality, politeness and hospitality, sexual restraint and that peaceful solution of social conflicts. This coupled with ideas of good and evil, right and wrong, parents and children, past, present, and future: the universality of values makes it possible for us to understand one another.

To that extent, cosmopolitanism works on the level of universality. But there is also an implicit recognition of difference. For cosmopolitanism maintains on the one hand the central idea of a universal truth, and on the other hand is skeptical about absolute truths. This skepticism is based on a realistic estimation of the difficulties involved in finding our way to the truth. The sketch-like argument is reminiscent of well-known arguments from critical realism, not just because considerations on “fallibility” are picked up. On a second level, Appiah uses an argument against positivism that could be called in Popper’s terms a “logic of the situation”. There is no reason not to believe in witch-

management revue, 19(4): 340-341

ISSN (print) 0935-9915, ISSN (internet) 1861-9908, © Rainer Hampp Verlag, www.Hampp-Verlag.de

craft, as long as there is no alternative plausible explanation. Academics are all too familiar with how difficult it is to establish alternative theories, even if they dispose of anomalies of the dominant opinion. All the same, in everyday life we can deal with anomalies and contradictions if we understand our alter ego's context of action.

Appiah's proposed solution to the problem is simple and emphatic: seek out conversation: conversation is the preferred means for engaging across borders, cultures, and religions with the experiences of other people. This notion of conversation has little in common with the normative prescriptions from Frankfurt or the abstract formulations of system-theoretical sociology. Appiah, committed to pragmatism, suggests conversation instead as a kind of everyday philosophical practice. Just as universal as the means suggested is the mode it should take place in: affability.

But now matter how amicably Anthony Appiah presents his argument, all the more stubborn is his battle cry against the proposition of cultures in struggle. Cultures do not find themselves in conflict with one another, interest do; it is in these conflicts that cultural relativism is at home. Cultures do not fight one another, they mix, cultural purity is a contradiction in itself. The implications of this foundational thesis, for example living together in multicultural neighborhoods, the possession of cultural artifacts of one community or another, or the encounter and preservation of unique aspects in the global village are exemplified by Appiah in many ways. The pragmatism of his considerations also directs his proposed reformulation of the golden rule: if you are in a situation where you can prevent an evil, and it doesn't cost you much, you should do it.

The fluid style of the writing, the clear argumentation, and not least the exemplary recourse to his own multinational background make the book a reading pleasure, without concealing the astute argument. The reader just wants to go on listening in the inspiring hope that everything will turn out fine. All the same, for my taste several aspects remain underexamined. From a socioeconomic point of view, we need to find out more about the hard factors in the structure of the society-the economy and law. If we want to use the argumentation here to found an international personnel management, in this understanding an expansion of the philosophical debate is necessary. As an economist, Amartya Sen (2006), who in Appiah's sense also argues for the centrality of difference, emphasizes inequality of the distribution of access to material resources. Hauke Brunkhorst (2005) in contrast points to the classical problem of community versus society to develop his argument of universal human rights in a legal sociology. These approaches thus present two useful complements to Appiah's plea for cosmopolitanism as a foundation of a socio-economic theory of responsible action in a globalized economy.

References

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- Sen, Amartya (2006): *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York, London: Norton.

Hamburg, September, 29, 2008

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