Debate
A Reply to Miller

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In his incisive discussion, David Miller makes a number of criticisms of my review article. To address Miller’s main critique it is important to have three claims before us. These are as follows.

the principal cosmopolitan claim: given the reasons we give to defend the distribution of resources and given our convictions about the irrelevance of people’s cultural identity to their entitlements, it follows that the scope of distributive justice should be global (Caney, 2001, p. 977);

radical cosmopolitanism: there are global principles of distributive justice and no nation-wide or state-wide principles of distributive justice;

mild cosmopolitanism: there are global principles of distributive justice.

Miller’s contention is that the principal cosmopolitan claim entails or is equivalent to radical cosmopolitanism but that at various key points my argument shifts from radical cosmopolitanism to mild cosmopolitanism. The defence of cosmopolitanism thus relies on oscillating between a radical and a mild version.

In response to this charge I want to make three points. The first is that the principal cosmopolitan claim does not entail radical cosmopolitanism and may be compatible with mild cosmopolitanism. This can be seen if we illustrate the claim with an example. Consider, for example, those who think that people should be assisted if they are vulnerable. To this, the principal cosmopolitan claim responds that if this is the rationale for redistribution, it implies that there should be global principles of distributive justice which protect the vulnerable. If vulnerability is a criterion for distributing resources the logical upshot is that everyone who exhibits this property should be assisted (Goodin, 1985, especially pp. 11, 154). In other words, the principal cosmopolitan claim follows through the global implications of people’s convictions about distributive justice.1 It does not entail that all principles of distributive justice have a global scope. Rather, it claims that the logic of most theories of distributive justice establishes some global principles of distributive justice but, within this, it allows some special rights.2 It would, for example, happily allow that people may generate special rights and duties by making a contract with each other.

Can one affirm the principal cosmopolitan claim and accept that persons have special duties to fellow nationals? Miller claims not and on first inspection his view appears justified. However, some who adopt a cosmopolitan approach think otherwise and in referring to mild cosmopolitanism my aim was to draw attention to those who think that it is possible to affirm both the principal cosmopolitan claim and special duties to fellow nationals (Barry, 1999, p. 59). Those who adopt this position some-
times argue for some global principles of distributive justice but then also argue that people can have special duties of distributive justice arising from a system of reciprocal cooperation and they argue further that, where this maps on to a nation, members of nations have special duties of distributive justice to fellow nationals. My own view, like Miller’s (1995, pp. 59–62) is that this is not a convincing argument for special duties to fellow nationals and my review criticised it (see Caney, 2001, pp. 980–1, for those who subscribe to it and criticisms of it) but this is not pivotal here. The key point is that it is logically possible to affirm the principal cosmopolitan claim and also accept special duties to fellow nationals if there is a morally significant feature that justifies special duties that maps on to nations (Barry, 1996, p. 431; Goodin, 1988, esp. pp. 663–4 and also pp. 678–86; Jones 1999, pp. 130–1, 133–4).

A second problem in Miller’s argument concerns his claim that some of the brands of cosmopolitanism covered are not committed to the principal cosmopolitan claim but ‘defend a much weaker position’ (p. 1010). He gives as examples theories which ascribe economic rights to all and theories which defend unconditional income for all. But I do not see why these are deviations from the principal cosmopolitan claim, for those who think that the right to subsistence and/or the right to a basic income should be applied globally do so by adverting to the principal cosmopolitan claim. To take the latter example, Philippe van Parijs reasons as follows: ‘each person owns herself’ and should have ‘the greatest possible opportunity to do whatever she might want to do’ (1995, p. 25). Given this, persons are entitled to basic income. But, as he himself stresses, if this is the logic underlying his theory (with its reliance on the entitlements of ‘each person’ – my emphasis) there should be global unconditional basic income (1995, pp. 227–8). In other words, the derivation of basic income for all takes the form outlined by the principal cosmopolitan claim. Accordingly, to affirm universal economic rights or universal basic income is not a move away from the principal cosmopolitan claim. None of the versions of cosmopolitanism considered, thus, require any equivocation between radical and mild cosmopolitanism.

Neither do the cosmopolitan responses to the criticisms of cosmopolitanism developed by the three other approaches, and this is my third response to Miller’s argument. The review considered seven objections to cosmopolitan principles – three levelled by nationalist political theorists, one levelled by John Rawls, and three levelled by realist theorists. It then outlined responses that could be made to these criticisms. In no case, however, does the cosmopolitan response depend on retreating from radical cosmopolitanism to its milder cousin. In the discussion of one of these seven challenges I did argue that some cosmopolitans might accept special duties to fellow nationals. However, I also argued that none of the arguments for special obligations to fellow nationals is persuasive (Caney, 2001, pp. 980–1, 983). And my view is that we do not have special obligations of distributive justice to fellow nationals (Caney, 1996, 1999). In short, then, my third response is that none of the arguments against the critics of cosmopolitanism requires a retreat from the radical to the mild view, for all the arguments made in reply to criticisms of cosmopolitanism hold even if we stick to radical cosmopolitanism alone. The reason that I mention the mild version is not to better enable cosmopolitans to cope with their critics. It is rather that some (although not myself) embrace the mild view.
For these three reasons the claim that ‘Caney’s argument relies on an equivocation about the meaning of “cosmopolitanism”’ (p. 1009) is, I think, unsupported.

Having questioned Miller’s first objection, I now want to turn to his suggestion that mild cosmopolitanism eviscerates the concept of cosmopolitanism of almost all meaning because virtually everyone would be a (mild) cosmopolitan. Against this, it is worth making four points.

First, to restrict the term cosmopolitanism to what I term radical cosmopolitanism would rule out many who would be classified as cosmopolitan thinkers. To give one example, Barry emphatically endorses the idea that persons have special duties to other members of their nation if the latter is understood in a civic nationalist sense (1999, p. 59).

Second, mild cosmopolitanism is not a vacuous concept for it is expressly rejected by numerous influential political philosophers. To give some prominent examples, Rawls (in *A Theory of Justice*) affirms no global principles of distributive justice (1999a, pp. 331–3). Similarly, global principles of distributive justice are rejected by Robert Jackson in his distinguished work *The Global Covenant* on the grounds that they curtail pluralism (2000). Terry Nardin similarly rejects any global principles of distributive justice (1983). Furthermore, Michael Walzer famously argues that distributive justice is appropriate solely within a ‘bounded’ social context, and thereby rejects global principles of distributive justice (1983, especially pp. 29–31). Hedley Bull’s *The Anarchical Society* is another example (1977). In other words, mild cosmopolitanism flies in the face of much work in ‘the society of states’ tradition.

Miller’s claim that the mild definition lets everyone in works by misdescribing mild cosmopolitanism as the view ‘that there are global duties of justice, duties owed by one human being to another that transcend borders’ (p. 1010). But mild cosmopolitanism (as I define it) does not make this claim. It is a claim, as Miller himself notes earlier (p. 1009), about distributive justice not just duties of justice. This is a critical difference for anti-cosmopolitans like Nardin, Walzer, Jackson, Rawls in *Theory* etc, who do not deny that there are international duties, including duties of justice. (It is thus false to say that the only way not to be a cosmopolitan is to be a realist who thinks that states can ‘pursue the national interest … regardless of the impact their actions had on outsiders’, p. 1010.) What they do deny is the existence of international obligations of distributive justice (as well as the idea that global justice is owed to individuals as opposed to states or peoples) and, as such, they deny mild cosmopolitanism.

A final point to be made in this context concerns Rawls’s later work for Miller says that even Rawls would count as a cosmopolitan if we allow the possibility of mild cosmopolitanism. This, though, is inaccurate. Rawls, it is true, affirms (as I note) a duty of assistance and some basic rights (1999b). A key factor, however, is not just the conclusions he reaches but the reasoning he gives. Recall the principal cosmopolitan claim: this maintains that given the reasons we give to defend the distribution of resources the scope of distributive justice should be global (Caney, 2001, p. 977).
Rawls’s affirmation of basic rights, however, is not based on these sorts of reasons, the sorts of reasons cosmopolitans give. Rather his derivation appeals to what decent peoples can embrace and he repudiates cosmopolitan claims about the equal standing of individuals (1999b, especially pp. 68, 82–3, 119–20). Rawls is thus most emphatically not a cosmopolitan and Miller’s argument ignores the first part of the principal cosmopolitan claim. In addition to this, since Miller characterises mild cosmopolitanism as the view that ‘there are global duties of justice, duties owed by one human being to another’ (p. 1010), Rawls is not a cosmopolitan since he eschews this individualistic approach, maintaining that peoples have obligations to other peoples. Mild cosmopolitanism is, thus, inconsistent with later Rawls as well as all the other theorists listed above.

Having defended my characterisation of cosmopolitanism, I now wish to turn to Miller’s account of the divide between cosmopolitans and their critics. Miller distinguishes between, on the one hand, those who think that there should be ‘global principles of distributive justice’ (cosmopolitans) and, on the other hand, those who affirm ‘non-distributive’ principles (anti-cosmopolitans) (p. 1011). Examples of the latter include principles of basic rights or theories concerned with ‘poverty, exploitation, or other such non-distributive forms of injustice’ (p. 1011).

A number of points can be made in response to this. First, it is not clear what criterion is being used to distinguish between distributive and non-distributive principles. It is, for example, unclear why anti-poverty principles, anti-exploitation principles and basic rights are not distributive principles of justice. What is the property that they all lack that is required for a principle of justice to be a distributive principle? Second, once we know the property being employed we need an argument explaining why this property is the salient one and we have yet to be given such an explanation. Otherwise, it appears an ad hoc manoeuvre designed to ensure that Miller’s favoured principles are not principles of distributive justice and hence are not cosmopolitan. Third, distributive justice is commonly understood to concern the distribution of burdens and benefits. But on these terms, a principle that prohibits exploitation is surely a principle of distributive justice. Similarly, basic rights concern the distribution of benefits (means of subsistence, say, or health) and burdens (who should bear the cost for these benefits). It is thus hard to see why Miller’s principles of justice are not distributive principles whereas a global difference principle, say, is. All specify how burdens and benefits are to be distributed.

Two further points can be made about Miller’s proposed distinction. First, Miller confuses his own distinction because, in addition to the criterion just discussed, he also refers to a second way in which cosmopolitans and their critics disagree. On this second criterion, non-cosmopolitans are concerned with ‘the terms on which political communities interact with each other’ (p. 1011 – my emphasis) whereas cosmopolitans presumably are concerned with the entitlement and duties of individuals. But if this is the contrast, then (a) it is distinct from the above one and (b) it is not distinct from my characterisation of cosmopolitanism (Caney, 2001, pp. 976–7, 986).

A further misgiving about Miller’s categorisation concerns its attempt to reduce the debate over international distributive justice to one contrast. My view is that we
better reflect the diversity of positions if we recognise that there is no single point of controversy. As I indicated in my review: some deny that there are any global principles of distributive justice; of those who affirm such principles there is extensive disagreement about how meagre or expansive they should be; there is further disagreement about the ranking of such principles; and there is disagreement about who has the duty to implement any global principles.

This leads on to the issue of the practical implications of Miller’s critique, for he claims that the upshot of his argument is that we must choose between a cosmopolitan world of uniformity and a nationalist world characterised by plurality (p. 1011).

To this three points should be made. First, we should observe that cosmopolitans will contest the description of their ideal as being one that will engender uniformity. Second, and more importantly, it is a corollary of the argument made above that it is inaccurate to think that we face the stark choice between Miller’s two worlds. Given the four points of disagreement listed above, what we actually face is a choice between a variety of positions along a broad spectrum. The final point to make is that we do not best capture the range of disagreement by describing one group as cosmopolitans and the other as nationalists, for often there is extensive disagreement within a group. Allied to this, our primary concern should, I believe, not be with taxonomic questions of who fits into which school (are you, or have you ever been, a cosmopolitan?). It is rather, what principles are correct, what they imply, who are the relevant duty-bearers and so on.

Miller’s own research is one of the richest and most interesting contributions to the debates on these issues. This notwithstanding, I believe that his critique of my review is unsuccessful and fails to:

• establish that my defence of cosmopolitanism equivocates between radical and mild versions;
• demonstrate that mild cosmopolitanism is too broad a category, and
• provide a plausible alternative account of the differences between cosmopolitans and their critics.

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Notes

1 For a particularly clear statement of this point see Black (1991, especially pp. 355–7) and Jones (1999, pp. 6, 8). For references to the others who make this point see Caney (2001, pp. 977–9 and footnote 14).

2 For this terminology see Hart (1985, pp. 84–8).

References


