Lea Ypi


The road to cosmopolitan justice is paved with domestic, state-based political associations. This is the bold and intriguing thesis of Lea Ypi’s Global Justice & Avant-Garde Political Agency. The book is a remarkable addition to the growing body of literature on global justice that attempts to find a midpoint between cosmopolitanism and statism (Richard Miller’s Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power, Gillian Brock’s Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account, and Robert Vernon’s Cosmopolitan Regard: Political Membership and Global Justice also fall in this category). In Ypi’s view, cosmopolitans are right on issues of principle, as they extend the scope of the demands of distributive justice from the domestic to the global arena (see e.g., Darrel Moellendorf and Martha Nussbaum), while statists are right on issues of agency (understood as the kind of relations that must be in place for principles to be politically viable), in their affirming the normative significance of political membership (see e.g., Yael Tamir and David Miller). Crucial to Ypi’s argument is an elucidation of the link between normative principles and political agency, which she provides in the first part of the book. The second part presents the appeals and shortcomings of statist accounts of associative political obligations (chapter 3) and of cosmopolitan defenses of global egalitarianism (chapter 4). Ypi develops her own theory, which she dubs ‘statist cosmopolitanism,’ in the third and last part of the book. She defends global egalitarian principles in chapter 5, the normative relevance of state-based associative conditions in chapter 6, and the role of cosmopolitan ‘avant-garde agents’ in chapter 7.

Both of the two rival theories in the global justice debate, according to Ypi, have failed to properly understand the link between principles and agency. Philosophers before Kant conceived of cosmopolitanism from an individualist perspective, as a ‘philanthropic’ attitude without implications for political agency. Kant was the first to make cosmopolitanism a matter of justice and a fundamental category to orient political action in the world. He understood that the cosmopolitan project of perpetual peace required, in Ypi’s words, ‘mobilizing political agency within the state because only here the relevant political, social, and cultural conditions necessary to an effective allocation of political obligations may be found’ (p. 30). Kant recognized the fundamental role of political agents who diagnose the defects of existing arrangements and identify innovative political remedies in the service of cosmopolitan principles. Ypi further conceptualizes these agents’ progressive leading role in the notion of ‘avant-garde political agency’, which is crucial to her dialectical
account of principles and agency. By reflecting on past historical processes in order to orient present action, her dialectical method combines ideal principles of morality with a notion of how to cope with non-ideal politics.

Most cosmopolitans focus on principles and neglect agency, while most statists focus on agency and derive principles from it. Ypi combines cosmopolitan principles with a statist account of agency. What is interesting about her argument for global egalitarianism is that it begins with what statists argue for at the global level, namely, a demand to relieve absolute deprivation (or ‘sufficiency’). Statists wrongly maintain that sufficiency and egalitarian principles of justice are distinct in scope, according to Ypi, because they lack an analysis of the causal link between absolute and relative deprivation (which cosmopolitans have also failed to provide). Conceiving of power as an important global positional good in circumstances of injustice, and thus as a crucial currency of distributive justice, she shows that the unequal distribution of power between states is responsible for important aspects of individuals’ absolute material deprivation. And so the statist demand for sufficiency at the level of individuals triggers a cosmopolitan demand for distributive equality at the level of states. On matters of principle, Ypi concludes, ‘even if we start as statists we might end up as cosmopolitans’ (p. 175).

But without the statist emphasis on political communities, cosmopolitan principles are politically unviable, according to Ypi, because they fail to move people to action. The difficulty is to motivate people to embrace, and act on, more progressive interpretations of the function and purpose of political institutions. Ypi argues that political communities provide the unique background circumstances under which cosmopolitan political agency could be considered successful (i.e., feasible and sustainable). She emphasizes the importance of politics – especially in a context of popular sovereignty – in shaping and renegotiating interpretations of the purpose and function of shared institutions. And whereas cosmopolitans tend to idealize individual moral capacities, simply assuming their existence and strength in everyone, Ypi stresses the role of civic education in molding moral personality and suffusing it with a sense of cosmopolitan justice. On matters of agency, therefore, ‘even if we start as cosmopolitans we might end up as statists’ (p. 175).

The statism in statist cosmopolitanism, however, may not be to a statist’s taste. State-based associations merely provide the background to pursue cosmopolitan justice, according to Ypi: ‘we need particular associative circumstances to get a motivational grip on people by activating their shared understandings so as to render politically effective particular principles of justice’ (pp. 137–138). Tracing a ‘statist route to cosmopolitanism’ constitutes a rather thin argument for statism, as non-statist routes may be shorter, safer, or