



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Hoover, J. (2010). Book Review: Toni Erskine, Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies In a World of 'Dislocated Communities'. Millennium: journal of international studies, 38(3), pp. 839-842. doi: 10.1177/03058298100380031001

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/11915/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298100380031001>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

The revival of international political theory as a field tends to lead to either genuinely insightful works or those that take on the worst vices of both political theory and international relations. Toni Erskine's *Embedded Cosmopolitanism* sits comfortably in the former category. Her argument for a cosmopolitan position that remains committed to an embedded theory of moral agency is theoretically sophisticated and politically informed, combining contemporary work in political and moral philosophy with an immediate concern with the laws of war and the proper treatment of the 'enemy'. The strength of the book is its clarity and rigour, which do not on their own carry Erskine's argument, but even where she fails to break new ground her critique builds upon existing debates and draws disparate voices together in an illuminating way.

Erskine joins a choir of voices attempting to rearrange the score of international political theory, but she manages a modulation rather than voicing a new tune or convincing countermelody. At the centre of the book is a search for compromise, her goal is to 'present embedded cosmopolitanism as the most promising course to travel if one starts from a particularist account of the moral agent and envisages as one's goal a global sphere of equal moral standing' (p. 40). Throughout she is a sympathetic critic of both cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Importantly, she provides an analysis of the varieties of cosmopolitan theory, while also facilitating an exchange between Michael Walzer and different voice feminism.

Erskine disambiguates the central debate into two related tensions. One point of disagreement is over the appropriate sphere of equal moral standing that we should respect. The second regards our account of moral agency. According to Erskine, impartialist cosmopolitans occupy one prominent intersection of these two issues, as they take equal moral concern as a constitutive element of impartialist morality. This implies that individual agents are able to discern moral principles, which are unaffected by one's context and globally applicable. Further, the nature of morality requires equal regard for all human beings. This perspective acts as Erskine's primary foil for her embedded cosmopolitanism. The compromise she attempts builds upon communitarian theories stressing the contextual nature of moral agency, which suggest that our sphere of equal moral standing is, and ought, to be restricted to some smaller segment of humanity.

By setting out two continuums on which to place different perspectives Erskine creates four ideal-types (pp. 36, 41, 68). This usefully clarifies many of the debates in international political theory, revealing points of agreement and tension. Perhaps the most immediate reward of her analysis is that it becomes easier to place Rawls' later work within the wider debate. Erskine argues that he holds an impartialist view of moral agency but limits the sphere of equal moral standing. Throughout the book Erskine's engagement with figures such as Rawls, Onora O'Neil, Brian Barry and Mervyn Frost is excellent. It is in the second half that Erskine's central point of departure emerges.

In considering accounts of situated moral agency, it is Erskine's sustained examination of Walzer's work that is most significant. Acknowledging his instrumental endorsement of the state as a morally constitutive community, she concentrates on his more basic concern with community as the locus of ethical and political life. The sections on Walzer are insightful and anyone trying to understand

the contours of his thought will be well served. There are points where his position is misrepresented, which seem to serve a rhetorical function - making Walzer's position inherently compromised by confusion – but this is a small failing. Erskine is considerably more successful in bringing the insights of different voice feminism to bear on Walzer's communitarianism.

Erskine questions the easy correlation between state borders and constitutive communities, and she disrupts the assumption that such communities are singular. Using Carol Gilligan's work on moral agency as an opening, Erskine argues that not only is moral reasoning dependent upon context, it is developed through our belonging in many contexts, which in their totality constitute our sense of self. She turns to Marilyn Freidman's work to develop her account of embedded moral agency, which is imagined as a web of relationships to many different communities, which are not defined by political or geographical borders but by disparate elements of our experience. This is an important insight and even though later sections developing the idea of embedded cosmopolitanism are not as convincing as one might hope, the move to rethink community in this way is important.

The care with which earlier sections are written comes at a cost, as they provide an extended survey of the field rather than a substantive critique, taking up space that could have been used to develop the central thesis more. Erskine puts important challenges to her own position, but the answers here, while evocative, are not satisfying. In particular, she notes the tenuous nature of embedded cosmopolitan, as an 'inclusive moral purview cannot be taken for granted either as being perpetually present from an impartialist perspective that reveals our common humanity, or as readily achievable during "universal moments". Rather, it must be actively pursued and obstacles to such a purview must be identified and consciously avoided' (p. 242). Her examination of the rules of war regarding non-combatant immunity and the prohibition of torture suggests that she is well aware of the significance of the state as a constitutive community and the force it exerts on our moral lives. It is a sign of intellectual honesty that she accepts these difficult conclusions as obstacles to developing embedded cosmopolitanism.

More frustrating is the failure to engage with the cosmopolitan aspiration for equal moral standing. This assumption is questionable and in as much need of critique as the identification of the state as constitutive moral community. Accepting that communities are plural and dynamic raises the question of why our moral concern would not likewise be more richly textured. The cosmopolitan demand to consider all human beings as having equal moral worth is practically untenable, that much is admitted by impartialist cosmopolitans, and it seems more important to understand particular situations, as universal equal concern is not required in every case. Knowing when our primary concern should be focused on those nearest to us and when it should be focused on outsiders requires attention to specific circumstances, rather than assuming an inclusive sphere of equal moral standing is desirable.

In the end, Erskine's book is rewarding and useful. It will serve as a prompt to further work on these important questions and at the same time encourage closer interaction between disciplines, as the book successfully engages with international political theory, moral philosophy and feminist social psychology. The limitations offer openings for further development as often as they inhibit the argument, and as a first

book this text suggests that Erskine will continue to produce rigorous and important work.