

# Kwame Anthony Appiah

What does it mean to be a 'Citizen of the World'?

**Key Concepts:** 'Mistaken Identity', Cosmopolitanism,  
**Key Work:** *Cosmopolitanism – Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006),  
*Education for Global Citizenship* (2008)

**“The boundary of your state is not the boundary of your moral concern.”**

**Appiah views 'Cosmopolitanism' as “the name not of the *solution*, but of the *challenge*” that we face in a globalized world. This challenge has two interrelated components.**

**Personal Background**  
Even Appiah’s name gives us an indication of the multiple aspects to his identity. Born in 1954, his mother was the daughter of Sir Stafford Cripps, a former *Chancellor of the Exchequer* (1947-50). Born in Gloucestershire, she travelled widely and before meeting and marrying ‘Nana’ Joe Appiah. He was an independence activist born in the ‘Gold Coast’ (modern Ghana). He was also a tribal leader of the ‘Ashanti’ people within Ghana. In London, he was the President of the West African Students’ Union. Their marriage in 1953 was the first Interracial Society wedding and front page news. Kwame has joked that they really were a mixed marriage: “She’s Anglican, and he’s a Methodist!” Of his own identity, KAA noted, “I always had a sense of family and tribe that was multiple and overlapping: nothing could have seemed more commonplace.”

Firstly, it is the ideas that “*we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to who we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship.*” By this Appiah suggests that we all share a common humanity that should be recognized and that should influence how we interact with people

Secondly, that we “*take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.*” Individuals matter. But we must also be able to imagine the individuality of those people who we will never meet!

If we combine these two ideas, we might come to the conclusion that we need to have a ‘Respect for Universality’ with a ‘Recognition that there are forms of difference that should be allowed to persist’. In other words, not everybody has to be the same for the world to work well. As Appiah says, “We are all one thing – on the other hand, we have forms of difference that are ok!”  
There are things we have to agree on (i.e. HUMAN RIGHTS), but beyond that there’s a wide range of things that it’s up to each individual and each community to make up their own minds about.

**Crucially, Appiah acknowledges that “Cosmopolitans are tolerant enough of difference to know that some people aren’t Cosmopolitans!”**  
**You may be morally obliged to TOLERATE difference, but not morally obliged to CELEBRATE it!!**

**At its most basic level: Cosmopolitanism = Universality + Difference**

KAA has some great practical advice for ‘cosmopolitans’. “*Make sure that you watch one film with subtitles every month!!!!*”

**Placing ‘Cosmopolitanism’ within what we already know**  
In one way, we might think of Cosmopolitanism as a bridge between strict adherence to ‘Nationalism’ and an opposing, homogenous, ‘global’ identity, where **cultural hegemony** makes everyone pretty much the same. These are forces that “pull in different directions” as David Held argues. Appiah is no extremist. He argues for ‘**Partial Cosmopolitanism**’ which he defines as “we need takes sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality.” It is a middle ground.

"Modern Identity is *shared* (social), not *personal* (innate)."

Self

Family

Nationality

Gender

Class

Race

Religion

Sexuality

CREED – Religious Identity

Religious identity is not JUST a matter of belief, but rather has 3 interconnected elements:

- Orthodoxy – Correct Belief
- Community – Fellowship at the core of religious beliefs
- Orthopraxy – Correct Conduct

The traditional view that "To be a believer is to believe what is in the scriptures" is a 'false proposition', because the scriptures always require some degree of **interpretation**. If they weren't being re-interpreted, then they wouldn't survive over a long period of time.

Appiah highlights the 'Fundamentalist Fallacy', namely, "though they venerate the old, they're all new, being reactions to the modern world." They deny others the ability to re-interpret religious texts, when it is this exact process that they rely on. This undermines the validity of extremists like the Taliban.

What Appiah was seeking to show is that "the story of sacred and ecclesiastical texts is the story of their readers: of shifting and often clashing interpretations." By making this argument, he was trying to strip away some of the certainties that underline the ways in which different religious faiths have driven a wedge between people, and make a shared humanity more difficult.

COUNTRY – National Identity

In what we might legitimately view as a drawing on Benedict Anderson's argument about the 18<sup>th</sup> C origins of 'the nation', Appiah argues that the shallow historical roots of nationalism undermine its value as a means of defining one's identity.

He points out that nationalism argues in favour of 'National Sovereignty'. "We are a people, we share an ancestry, we should rule ourselves...", but there are many cases in which this shared ancestry doesn't lead to a nation. For example, the Celts of Britany, Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Mann share an ancestry, but 'don't care too much about acting on that shared national identity!' Similarly, in 1893, Eugen Weber pointed out that 25% of the 30 million French citizens couldn't speak French, and that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Italy had 20 regional dialects.

'Bo Jo' argued that "Brexit was about the right of the people of this country to settle their own destiny", but wanted to deny that same right to the people of Scotland!

Appiah argues that this leads to a degree of incoherence. Yes, **WE** have the right to self-determination, but that thought can only guide us once we've decided who **WE** are! (Does this remind you of Anderson's idea that nationalism is 'Philosophically weak, but emotionally strong'?)

His father argued, "National consciousness is not a mineral to be excavated like bauxite, it was a fabric to be woven."

COLOUR – Racial Identity

KAA points out that 19<sup>th</sup> C ideas of Race have had a deep and lasting impact on the modern world. At that time, while slavery continued, visible differences in physical attributes, such as skin colour, were linked to their 'moral' character. The 'Racial Fixation' of the 19<sup>th</sup> C argued: "everything important about people was shaped by their race, conceived of as a heritable biological property." This ideology shifted from 'Enslavement' to 'Colonization'. You might have been assigned to the category of 'Negro' based on skin colour, lips, or hair, but "these were only the beginning of the cataloguing of deeper differences."

He pointed out that "the common currency of negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance, has proved dauntingly difficult to withdraw from, even as its intellectual foundations started to crumble." i.e. modern genetics finally 'untethered' the link between your physical qualities and your intellectual pursuits. Therefore, "if you want to think about how the limits of individual human capabilities are set by genetic inheritance, it won't help you to think about races."

A version of this still persists, however, in the form of 'Cultural Appropriation'. That is defined as, 'taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions or artefacts from someone else's culture without permission.' Appiah points out that that 'someone else' is often defined by race, and asks: "Is the colour line also a property line?"

CULTURE – 'Civilization'

KAA argues that "We should give up the very idea of *Western Civilization*." He argues that it is 'Historically Difficult' to justify because it ignores the other 'cultures' that shared in its development. "The problem here is that the learning it identified was shared with Muslim learning. During the 'Dark Ages' the 'lost' classical texts were preserved by Muslim scholars and rediscovered during the renaissance."

He points out that the very idea of the 'West' was a relatively late invention (we'll return to this with Edward Said), and that the long line of continuity that is seen to exist between Classical Greece & Rome and the modern West (PLATO to NATO) only took shape during the Cold War as a 'grand narrative'. That narrative argued that Western Cultures is 'individualistic, democratic, tolerant liberty-minded, scientific, progressive and rational', while ignoring the negative attributes such as 'slavery, militarism, genocide, subjugation, and racism.'

For KAA "Culture isn't a box to check on the questionnaire of humanity, it is a process you join, a life lived with each other." To re-inforce this idea he quotes Roman playwright 'Terence', a former African slave, who said, "I am human. I think nothing human alien to me." This is a clear argument in favour of KAA's own views on the need for a cosmopolitan sense of identity.