Living in community with others should not be an unknown concept for any of us. In fact, many argue that the practice of doing so is hard-wired into our very nature. Humanity’s early ancestors formed communities of necessity and survival, and in turn were shaped by that experience. And in the following thousands of years, our communities have grown from these small tribes, to villages and cities, empires and nation-states, and even, to some extent, a global order.

So the concept of coexistence is nothing foreign. We have been effectively living alongside one another for some time. However, the world is changing; it is growing smaller, metaphorically, due to what many will cite as globalization. Individuals across the planet can now understand, interact with, and thus impact nearly any one of Earth’s seven billion inhabitants. Communities formed around ancestral history, geographical locale, creed, and national identity are ever all the more likely to encounter those of different roots. As a result, coexistence is more important than ever, but is now, perhaps, all the more challenging.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, like many other modern-day philosophers, addresses this very question in his work *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, and we barely have to read past the title to understand his particular lens – that of the cosmopolitan. But his project is slightly different from that of some of his predecessors. Appiah questions how appropriate it really is to expect people to “abjure all local allegiances and partialities in the name of this vast abstraction, humanity.” Rather he builds his vision of a cosmopolitan world on the premise that the partiality of “kinfolk and community” is not just unavoidable, but is actually a constructive force in bringing the members of this globalized world closer together. His premise is something similar to cultural pluralism, though he would be unlikely to define it that way.

Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism is comprised of two primary, and interconnected, principles. The first is that our obligations to others reach beyond the traditional associations of family, culture, and citizenship. The second component reminds us that cosmopolitanism is not an abstract concept in that it reaches to the individual level. It’s not just human life that is
valuable, but the particular lives that individuals lead. Here, Appiah is reminding his audience that difference is not innately a barrier to his project, but rather it’s the opposite, in that it is more of a catalyst. It’s from the foundation of these two principles that he identifies conversation as the primary means to build a world steeped in the cosmopolitan ideal. The extent of his work specifically identifies how to do this, which is balanced between making an argument on behalf of his project and identifying the likely misconceptions with regards to his view of cosmopolitanism.

The first half of the work lays out his vision of cosmopolitanism as an unavoidable challenge, rather than some overarching endgame. It’s a process rather than a goal. He opens with a critique of positivism, explaining that it overemphasizes the role of “facts” and downplays the importance and impact of “values.” In chapters two and three, he argues that “values aren’t as flighty as the Positivist supposes… [and] facts aren’t quite so solid.” As a result, relativism creates too fragmented a view of the world; one that is separate, not shared and just perceived differently. He continues on to acknowledge the existence of universal moral principles that will not only bring us together, but help define the level of obligations. He distinguishes these from local obligations – those that one has to family, friends, cultural norms and so forth – which claims are different but as crucial to his views.

He then proposes the idea of a primacy of practice. This concept states that we are more likely to agree on what to do (as the “right” thing to do), rather than why we all do it. To a certain extent the values beneath the surface don’t matter as much. Thus, when there is a point of moral disagreement, Appiah believes that we will naturally change our minds over time rather than be convinced by any particular principle or worldview. This is perhaps a bit optimistic. Regardless, he believes that conversation with each other, between individuals and between communities of varying degrees, is the crucial factor in peaceful coexistence. Despite any differences there may be, shared characteristics and values will serve as the point of entry into these conversations, and that which makes us all different will foster the interest and respect required to coexist.

He then identifies what cosmopolitanism is not, and specifically notes fundamentalism. It is easy for some to see cosmopolitanism, in the greater context of wanting to bring the world together, as an effort to eliminate our differences. However, a single global order, or unified culture, is a misconception of what cosmopolitanism really is. Fundamentalists believe only their
worldview, and while they want to share it with those beyond their own community, they do not do so in a way that Appiah would agree with. He describes them as “Believers without Borders.” They may be globalist, multi-lingual, and well-traveled, but they are not so with the intent to share in others’ cultures and ideals and much as they are willing to “share” their own, an effort that is usually forceful and potentially coercive. In this sense, Appiah identifies Muslim neofundamentalists as “Counter Cosmopolitans.”

Appiah relies on an artistic style with his writing that balances narrative and argument. He is British born and educated, but of African decent and thus spent much of his childhood growing up in the Asante region of Ghana. He relies heavily on his own past experiences and unique family and cultural history to help support his comments, which are often articulated as easily digestible anecdotes. This approach impacts the reader in two ways.

First, it not only makes the book easier to consume, while still providing examples that help illustrate his points. For example, when he discusses the difference between cultural taboos and moral obligations, he relies on a story about his father’s obligation to his clan, which required him to avoid eating bush meat. Appiah’s overall point is that not all obligations are moral, in that you don’t owe them to everybody, but still may be crucial to your own development or to your ties to your community, clan, heritage, et cetera. This particular story makes such an understanding more vivid. And what Appiah ultimately accomplishes by incorporating these bits and pieces of Asante life and lore throughout the work is that he exposes the readers to a culture they most likely were not familiar with prior. Through the support of individual elements of his argument, he instills within the reader an interest in Asante culture, which essentially supports his overall thesis that a cosmopolitan project relies on an interest in each others’ differences.

However, his style is not without fault. Often, it is too easy to get lost among the stories. Though fascinating, they can distract the reader from some of the more complex components of Appiah’s argument. The easy-to-read narrative style runs the risk that the reader could forget, at times, that they are proceeding through a crafted argument on behalf of a specific approach to a cosmopolitan project, rather than reading a number of culturally intriguing stories that tie together to make some strong thematic generalizations. If reading cautiously, this is not as much of an issue. Regardless, it’s important to note this potential drawback to his style.
Overall, this is an enjoyable work that takes a pragmatic approach to a topic that has historically been misrepresented and accepted in its extremes. Though perhaps a bit too optimistic, it does maintain a sense of realism in that Appiah does not expect the individual to sacrifice what is near and dear to them in order to create a world order where all humans feel equally obligated to each other and act accordingly. Rather he builds his argument on the understanding of certain universal moral principles that will innately bind us all together, but rely on our cultural differences, and mutual respect for such, to ultimately bring us together, not separate us. All in all, I found *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* to be fascinating, well written, and enlightening, and would recommend it to anyone interested in the titled concept.