

PHILOSOPHY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE INTERCULTURAL SENSE

Dean Komel

► University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

130.2"19":327.33

The author discusses the idea of a constitution of intercultural behaviour from a phenomenological and hermeneutical point of view. In his opinion, the historical tradition of philosophical thought has already developed intercultural elements. The question arises as to whether interculturality is only one aspect of the contemporary cynical annihilation of the word or, on the contrary, if it offers a different comprehension of human existence, a way to escape from nihilism. The author's reply stresses the possibility of a hermeneutical constitution of intercultural sense, connected with a possible future European dialogue as a way of mutual understanding within one culture and among different cultures.

Key words: philosophy of culture / interculturality / hermeneutics / nihilism / humanity

Contemporary philosophy is conspicuously fragmented into numerous areas. Some contemporary philosophers deliberately renounce the possibility of rational argumentation; others reduce philosophical argumentation solely to logical analysis. Moreover, we are witness to constant redefinitions of the historical possibilities of philosophy. In such a situation, it is more than justified to raise the question of whether we can still put forward a philosophical claim for the *constitution of intercultural sense*.

Deconstructivism, as a philosophical basis of the post-modern age, claims that all that is available is the reduction of sense, and not reduction to sense. However, constitution is not reduction to sense, and even less construction of sense. Constitution points to the ongoing event of sense, which can also include its own negation, as Hegel pointed out. Hegel, however, and counter-Hegelian deconstructivism and critical theory, in principle fail to grasp the constitutional problem, because they state it within the world, rather than on the level of the *worldliness of the world itself*. And by so doing, they also overlook the boundaries of the philoso-

phical consideration of interculturality as a possibility of an encounter within a culture, as well as among cultures.

The philosophical presuppositions of interculturality can be discussed in several ways. We can take philosophy, as it has developed in its two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old history, for the traditional ground of the intercultural sense of Europe and West. Then it is possible to consider how we can, on this very ground, philosophically handle intercultural phenomena. And finally, we can detect the influence of intercultural mutual understanding in the way contemporary philosophy understands its sense and purpose. Since the first line of thinking about the philosophical presupposition of inter-culturality is fairly far-reaching, we can focus only on its delineation.

Considering thoroughly how interculturality can employ philosophical thinking anew, implies that we already know what constitutes interculturality from the philosophical viewpoint. We thus find ourselves caught within a hermeneutic circle, in which both the philosophy of interculturality and intercultural philosophy try to find a way out for each other. Although this circle most probably cannot be totally avoided, we shall try not to get completely caught up in it and lose our stance. It is our *standpoint* that the path of thought which is trying to establish itself as an intercultural philosophy – as far as it is not merely some form of comparative culture studies – in principle overlooks the essential intercultural sense of philosophy, which has been present since its very beginning and which contributed essentially to the foundational idea of European humanity, and can in the future help bring about its redefinition. Such redefinition does not imply a repetition in the sense of historical restoration, with a renewed return and recourse to origins. The redefinition differs from repetition in the same way that constitution differs from construction: it does not accept historicity as a past identity, but rather re-establishes it in the openness of its future difference.

Within the philosophy of the 20th century, this foundational idea of European humanity, as well as the need for its redefinition, was given particular prominence by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenological philosophy; among his followers, we should also mention Hans-Georg Gadamer, and more recently Klaus Held and Bernhard Waldenfels. Since Husserl's careful consideration on the *worldliness of world* has been acknowledged by critics as diverse as Habermas, Luhmann, Levinas or Derrida, it can serve as an exemplary hermeneutic problem of contemporary philosophy in general, which can be encountered in all its areas; it is related to the question of whether, and how philosophy should mediate a unified understanding of the world without disregarding the differences which determine it, and the exteriority it verges on.

The question is focussed interculturality in a specific way, such that it makes culture an agent of *mediation*, insofar as it opens its centre? *middle* and mediates itself interculturality. And it is here that the philosophical issue of the constitution of this mediating centre *middle* of the inter-dimension of inter-culturality appears. This mid-dimension is not given *per se*, but demands our involvement. We are justified in claiming that

such philosophical involvement, already sketched by Edmund Husserl, contributes to the acknowledgement and recognition of common world experience, in that it does not set up a culture as "ours" or "yours", but rather in the mediation between "one's own" and the "alien". It does not take possession of the alien in order to achieve its own acknowledgement; neither does it exclude the alien in order to defend its own essence. The "essence", in the sense of "identity" as a mode of existence, preserves itself only in anticipation of its own mediation; otherwise it becomes alienated and is seized by a fear of annihilation. The annihilation of the *life-world*? is deeply related to the question of the foundational redefinition of European humanity, as is indicated by Nietzsche's idea of "European nihilism", Scheler's "age of reconciliation", Husserl's "crisis of European humanity", and Heidegger's "oblivion of being", not to mention literary examples.

It is this very mediating sense of culture as interculturality that may reveal that the alienation of the modern world does not imply only negation, which should be overcome, but also affirmation, which calls for the constitution of sense, and which first and foremost implies that a dimension of the world goes on "among" us, and also between "us and us". Even though in truth it can never be reduced solely to us, it is accepted by us already when we ask what is and what is not real. This is even a basic "lesson" given by philosophy – namely, that we cannot commune with the world as something private, not even when we ask for it to change.

The philosophy of culture today cannot rely, for example, on a critical theory of society which would be transformed into a revolutionary practice, or on any "pure theory" which shows no interest in the world and its alienation. Global development segregates "us" and "them", but in a special way, such that both "we" and "they" remain unacceptable in what is genuinely our own. The other cannot be accepted if we do not first accept and even change ourselves; and here a pure philosophical question arises: *who are we?*

In what way can we say that philosophy, since its very beginnings, has been interculturally effective, and that, on this basis, it historically affected the foundational understanding of European humanity? Philosophy stems from speculation on what *is*, on questions of *being* as such and as a whole. Thus we refer roughly to Aristotle's definition of philosophy. It is obvious that such questions cannot persist in the closed environment of one's own culture, but have to be opened for themselves in – and towards – a world in which various cultures meet, transcending themselves as ordinary environments. *The world* means the *opening up of one's own culture*. In this trans-cultural sphere, philosophy manifests itself in the opening up of the world's horizons, in which various cultures find themselves as if within a certain whole or even a universe of sense. It starts raising questions as to what is the meaning of this and that, and what is the sense of it all. This cannot prevent one culture from outrunning another, nor can it directly enable one culture to cross into another. The primary effect of this loosening of global horizons is that culture as such *becomes a question*, that there arises the need for its definition, and that on the

basis of this, a culture *itself* transforms into its constitutionality, which is the main criterion of its acceptability. A testimony of this first transformation of the sense of culture into a foundational sense, which makes culture meaningful for us, can be found in Cicero's statement "*Philosophia cultura animi est*", insofar as it explicitly co-defines culture and philosophy. Before that, the word *cultura* had the sense of "cultivation" and "growing", but not its own foundational sense, which was philosophically indicated already by Protagoras: "Of all things, the measure is man – of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not."

Precisely in the manner it is defined in its foundational sense, the world *cultura* from the beginning points to the crisis of its own definition, which in the late condition of European culture, in the work of Georg Simmel, turns out to be a "tragedy of culture". This crisis of culture is also connected with philosophy within the framework of mutual definitions. Culture does not presuppose only one, binding and all-embracing philosophy in the form of a world-view, and philosophy itself never includes only one, but by rule, several cultures. No doubt certain conditions had to be fulfilled for Cicero to be able to articulate the definition of culture in philosophical terminology; first and foremost, philosophy at its very beginning had to comprehend itself as an elucidation of mind.

What is the philosophical elucidation of mind? For the Greeks, the soul refers not only to human life, but living beings in general. However, only the human soul can be elucidated. It is precisely because of this "fact" that the elucidation of mind leans towards the education of the spirit, as is shown in Plato's metaphor of the cave. The elucidation of mind and the education of the spirit mean the search for the *unity of different* aspects of life. This search for *Unity in Diversity* is a concern for that which is, inasmuch as it is becoming and passing away, staying and leaving, growing and fading away. That the world shows itself in its diversity is an announcement of the freedom in which life fulfils itself as *praxis*; and at the same time, this life experiences the revelation of a world. Life and the world are different, but nevertheless unified. Human beings grow at the locus of this unity in difference by simultaneously yearning for it. A magnificent indicator of this yearning is Greek art, which makes sense – and not without reason – of our culture in general. This is why culture is up to this very day a synonym for life with a higher, excellent, and differentiating sense.

Since philosophy defines being as such and as a whole, which opens up a kind of global horizon, it is necessary that there arise the issue of the relationship between diversity and unity, between the One and the Many. Philosophy is thus searching for "unity in difference", in which differentiation itself is understood as ascending to something higher, which perfects the very human essence. In his novel *Hyperion*, Friedrich Hölderlin writes: "The great Heraclites' saying *hen diapheron heauto* (the One differentiated within itself) could only be discovered by a Greek, because it is the essence of beauty, and before it had been discovered, there was no philosophy ... The Egyptian was incapable of doing it. He who doesn't

live with the sky and the earth in the same love and counter-love, he who doesn't live in harmony with this element, in which he moves, is by nature in himself disharmonious and doesn't experience eternal beauty, at least not as easily as the Greek."¹ This "One differentiated within itself", *hen diapheron heauto*, if we follow Hölderlin's notes, therefore proves a lot harder nut to crack than it might at first appear. Where do the difference and the differentiated stem from? What is the sense of the One and Unity in this difference? This question leads to the *disclosure of being as such*, the comprehension of the world within Unity in Diversity, which reveals a special type of the good, true and beautiful.

The actuality of this issue is shown by the fact that intercultural philosophy directs its primary attention to diversity rather than unity. This attention should, of course, be critically questioned, since the advocacy of diversity, and not unity, is not as simple as we would want or wish it to be. Difference and diversity are not to be considered as things "in themselves", but rather as things "in relation"; if, however, we would like to consider difference outside the relation, we have to think of it as the differentiating One, as something that is beyond comparison, which also holds for Derrida's *differance*. However, this "differentiating One" was already pondered by Heraclites. Would it not be more appropriate to reconsider open-mindedly this original beginning of the One in Diversity, rather than forcefully – and at any cost – prefer diversity to unity? If we make such a decision, there instantly arises the question of the coordinates of our own starting point.

"Unity in Diversity", magnificently epitomized in Greek *logos*, is the founding event of European and Western humanity; it is not intra-cultural (i.e. an ancient Greek and then Latin event), it is emphatically intercultural, provided that it forms the ground for the development of European history and Western civilization. It enables contact and permeation among cultures, as is obviously the case in early Christianity, which would later ground its sense only in *logos*, understood in the unity of the universal, individual and particular. With Christianity, we can detect the formation of a specifically individual attitude to the world on the one hand, and that universalistic supremacy of the West, which in its eschatological pretensions often directs its destructive power against other cultures, if they are thought worthy of such a designation in the first place. This is where the problem of freedom comes into play, with its particular and universal senses, provided that a human being has to acknowledge the freedom of all human beings in order to attain their own freedom. The cultivation of this freedom can be understood as the development of humanity, which is no doubt a fundamental feature of the spiritual history of Europe; it is particularly characterized by the phenomenon of the Enlightenment, in which the human essence sets itself apart as something unique; the fact that human beings have free use of mental abilities, gives them the assurance that they can have at their disposal whatever can be rationally represented. The modern human of the Enlightenment is as self-reliant as the emancipated conqueror.

With humans placing themselves, through their mental faculties, at the base point of all knowledge and practice in the world, the understanding

of Unity in Diversity changes at its very core. The world is in principle and primarily no longer grasped as a place in which life fulfils itself, but rather as something that is at our disposal already. Unity in Diversity is set up *systematically*, be it arithmetical, geometrical, transcendental, dialectical, or a positivistic model of systematics. This aspect of systematics is traceable not only in the field of philosophy and science; it is effective also on the intercultural level. European nations also establish themselves systematically as countries cultivating and enabling international relations. The basic positive heritage of this systematic regulation of international relations is the United Nations.

The systematic regulation of Unity in Diversity nevertheless suffers from exclusionism, in that the One of the system remains outside all the differences, while on the other hand diversity in the system can never be entirely subjected to the One if it is to remain diverse. Thus we are losing touch with the initial understanding of the world as Unity in Diversity. Within the framework of philosophy, this issue was tackled by Leibniz, who found his historical adversary in Voltaire; taken historically, systematically, the best possible world can also be the worst possible world. More far-reaching than this, however, is that we can methodically strive for history and nature taken as a system. This methodology of mastering history and nature each day turns more and more into *a method of power*, which can no longer be satisfied with acquired power, but desires to manipulate this power and become more and more empowered in this management of power, in ruling, mastering and prevailing.

Where systematics subjects historicity to its rule, we are faced with the disastrous consequences of this method of power, and the distinction is put into force between historical and non-historical nations, not on the grounds of historically manifested culture, cultural tradition, but on the grounds of systematically enforced power. The systematic regulation of history establishes itself as a historical world order and as that which even transcends this order with its power. Directly or indirectly, this inflames historical revolutions "from below", and restorations "from above", all of them culminating in the first half of the 20th century. They are not in decline, even today, at the beginning of the 21st century; on the contrary, they are gaining strength, even though we are inclined to speak of 'the end of history' after the establishment of the system of liberal democracy. We too easily forget that even an abolished history can strike back, not only in various aspects of traditionalism or even more threatening radicalisms and fundamentalisms, but also in the barely noticeable annihilation of the world.

The second half of the 20th century, the period of the so-called Cold War, already saw the consequences of such self-assurance in the power of the system, which is rooted in subjectivist views of the modern age, inasmuch as they seek to develop the ability of traversing from the unified to the diverse, the universal and individual, and the reverse. Undoubtedly, one of these is the positivism of the 19th century, which dared keep its "positive sense" even in the midst of contempt, annihilation, and the destruction of European humanity. Positivism is necessarily accompanied

by ideologies which seek to enforce upon the world a historical sense on the basis of dogma, in which differences between ideas, ideals and idols are sooner or later lost.

Two world wars, totalitarianisms, the age of the Cold War, the deepening gap between developed and undeveloped nations, and the present general threat of terrorism, are living proof that the positions and counter-positions of power can pass over, through the "formal emptiness" of systematic regulation, into a destructive history, also annihilating the political as such. "Formal emptiness" here means primarily operating with empty values, forgetting the loss of the unified value of life and diversity of its evaluations, enforcing supremacy instead, by continuously proving that everything can be regulated by being controllable. What is essential here is to maintain the virtuality of power, since this is apparently the only means of retaining the aspect of Unity in Diversity.

Although in a modified version, Nietzsche's discovery of European nihilism is still relevant, inasmuch as it calls our attention to the possibility of a historical spirit turning into a phantom, which is especially dangerous today, when this is far more efficiently achievable by using the power of a system. According to Nietzsche, nihilism stems from the incapacity of power to acknowledge differences. However, he did not become fully aware of the nihilism of power regulating all the differences. What is the sense of nihilism in the sense of traversing from identity to difference and back? Firstly, this traversal gives the appearance of power, and secondly, as power, it leaves behind both the unifying One and differentiating diversity, circling self-contentedly within itself. This means that in the unconditional enforcement of power there arises a question concerning the *sense* of that which empowers this power. It is to the great credit of Edmund Husserl and other philosophers of the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition that they warned us of the self-sufficient enforcement of the power of science as a system, which shows itself in the form of modern technology. Can, perhaps, a philosophical constitution of interculturality help form an alternative by taking culture as its mediator?

This is a question of a possible future sense of European humanity and of humanity in general, as far as it establishes itself in the values of "science", "politics", "freedom", "management" and "solidarity". Particularly from within the midst of interculturality, culture can mediate between these sectors in that it mediates Unity in Diversity in their worldly activities. This, of course, implies newly establishing culture in the direction of interculturality, which would *sensibly* build upon tradition rather than reject it. The perspective of this culture is as yet undetermined, but its horizon has already been revealed to us on the ground of the tradition of European humanity in its philosophical, artistic, religious, political, scientific and other aspects. On the one hand, it is supported by the complexity of the contemporary world dispersing into numerous worlds, and on the other, it has become quite clear that this complexity cannot be simplified on the grounds of a unified worldview, be it political, scientific, artistic, philosophical or economic. The world is not one on the grounds of an enforced worldview, the world is not dispersed into a multitude of

unrelated worlds, and the world is common to us all in the encounter of differences. It is individual for everybody, and yet common to us all. Its counterpart is exclusionism, limiting the shared world, interwoven with the own and the alien, solely to what is "ours", eventually reducing it to mere nothingness. This is perhaps one of the most difficult constitutive problems of the intercultural grounding of Europe, although its sense is strengthened by the fact that European culture has not constituted itself solely by defending its own essence, but more often in the element of crucial mediation between its own and the alien.

The direction towards a philosophy of interculturality is not limited only to the European internal sense; it has become, as it were, global, in that it *acknowledges the Earth* as a community of existence. The redefinition of European humanity points not only to the inner, but also to the outer dimension, in that it delineates to itself the fate of the whole planet, not only in the usual ecological aspect, but rather in the cultural, "inhabiting" aspect, already implied in the former. This sets the problem of interculturality in a much larger context of confronting Europeans with "Outer-Europeans" which also requires a changed concept of culture; it is no longer possible to cling solely to the notion of our own culture, not even the European one – every cultural self-representation comes to light in intercultural openness. "Leftist" theoreticians in particular detect in this nothing more than expansion of "Eurocentrism" and "hegemony and imperialism" by other means, directed by the power of the capital. However, we have to distinguish between the "economic propaganda" of multiculturalism and potential perspectives of interculturality, since we have no other starting point for confronting the most topical issues of contemporary society, including those compelled by the logic of capital. The possibility of *encountering* in the same world does not necessitate in advance imperialist global supremacy. On the contrary, this is what the philosophy of interculturality should demonstrate in reconsidering the concept of the world in a permeation of unity and diversity, without ideologically overthrowing the power of the One and suppressing diversity under the supremacy of the One.

"Encountering" is thus understood as the key word of the philosophy of interculturality, which has not only a methodological, but also a relational sense. Within encountering, we encounter someone or something, while we also encounter someone or something for the sake of the encounter itself.

NOTES

¹ F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, Stuttgart 1998, p. 91.

REFERENCES

- BRAGUE, Remy: *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris: Criterion 1992.
- CRISTIN, Renato/Fontana, Sandro: *Europa al plurale. Filosofia e politica per l'unita europea*, Venezia: Marsilio 1997.
- EAGLETON, Terry: *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2003.
- FERRY, Jean-Marc: *La Question de l'Etat Européen*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard 2000.
- HELD, Klaus: "Europa und die interkulturelle Verständigung", *Europa und die Philosophie*, Schriftenreihe der Martin-Heidegger-Gesellschaft 2, H.-H. Gander (ed.), Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann 1993, p. 87-103.
- HÖLDERLIN, Friedrich: *Hyperion*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1998.
- HUSSERL, Edmund: *Die Krisis des europäischen Menschentums und die Philosophie*. Mit einer Einführung von Bernhard Waldenfels, Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum 1995.
- GADAMER, Hans-Georg: *Das Erbe Europas*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1989.
- KOMEL, Dean: *Identità e mediazione. Per un'ermeneutica dell'interculturalità*, Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste 2002.
- MALL, Ram Adhar: *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen. Interkulturelle Philosophie – eine neue Orientierung*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Darmstadt 1995.
- RIFKIN, Jeremy: *Der Europäische Traum. Die Vision einer leisen Supermacht*, Hamburg: Campus Verlag 2004.
- SALLIS, John: "Beyond the Political: Reclaiming the Community of the Earth". In: *Phenomenology of Interculturality and Life-world*, E. W. Orth/C.-F. Cheung (ed.), Freiburg: Alber 1998.
- SCHNEIDER, Notker/Mall, Ram Adhar/Lohmar, Dieter (ed.): *Einheit und Vielfalt. Das Verstehen der Kulturen*, Amsterdam - Atlanta: Rodopi 1998.
- TAYLOR, Charles: *Multiculturalism and 'The politics of Recognition'*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992.
- WALDENFELS, Bernhard: *Topologie des Fremden*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1997.
- ŽIŽEK, Slavoj: "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism", *New Left Review* 225 (1997), p. 28-51.