

FOR A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHIES: HOW THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EQUALS MAKES PHILOSOPHY INTERCULTURAL

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between equals as a basic element of intercultural philosophy, putting it into a perspective which tries to valorize not only the two (or more) elements included in a relationship, but also highlight the importance of the concept itself, following Giangiorgio Pasqualotto's concept of relationship with three interdependent variables.

In the light of a renewal of the discipline and an attempt to overcome the crisis stressed in the latest Unesco documentation, those features are highlighted which render philosophy intercultural, and lead, on the one hand, to a theoretical rethinking in order to undermine the Western ethnocentrism which pervades it, and, on the other hand, show its practical positive effects (ethical, political, and especially pedagogical). Adopting this orientation and direction, this paper presents the hypothesis of a transformation of the traditional history of philosophy into a history of philosophies, to ensure to every philosophical tradition the acknowledgement and the respect of their peculiarities, analyzed in an interrelational way.

In a world that leads, more and more often, to the contamination and the contact between people and cultures, whether one likes it or not, the requirement of interculturality in academia and scholastic places will eventually become an urgency. On the one hand we have technological, economic and communicative globalization, and on the other, the transformation of

migrations from the phenomenal to the structural. The importance of research in this area suggests it requires more than an afterthought not only about how we currently live together, but also about the future possibility of new contaminations which will have a huge impact on present/future identities. Clarification will not only be needed for the here and now, but for how cultures and cultural identities will be affected in the future (in a neverending regenerative cycle).

Several schools of thoughts have tried to rise up to this challenge, through varied fields of knowledge. Three of the more common research tools used in this area of interest are static pluralism, dynamic pluralism and transculturalism.

The first one is well-known as multiculturalism, and it analyzes the living together, peaceful or not, between two or more cultures. It describes the reality of this phenomenon in a static way, highlighting the presence of various cultures within a country, acknowledging and saving their traditions and differences. However, it is registered as static data, blocks with no interaction or exchange, almost a motionless image of a "plurality of monocultures". It acknowledges mutual respect that is, it could be argued, equally unconcerned as it were.

Transculturalism (in which is also included what many authors call "metaculture") is similar to interculturality in its aims. However, it does get disoriented in looking for the formulation of a "beyond the cultures" in which the differences are saved for the purpose of a global human culture, on the model of a new Humanism. Once again the limits of this perspective are in its static nature and in the comparing of fixed structures, which results in getting involved with the quagmires of aculturalism. Moreover, the uniform view of the fragmented reality is not authentic enough to be considered appropriate and,

in the margin, hides underneath the cloak of ethnocentrism, which strongly limits its extent. With dynamic pluralism (the analysis of the real significant exchanges that have happened or are still happening, between two or more cultures, stressing both similarities and differences, and allowing to learn from one another) that is set within the context of how interculturality is perceived, then in this occasion "culture" is meant as a set – coherent but not necessarily peaceful inside – of different products highly symbolic (rites, languages, texts, arts, habits, values), geo-chronologically stratified but neither static nor unchangeable. In fact, this dynamic nature is of great relevance because it is one of the most fundamental features of cultural systems (never given for granted) and, thanks to the fluidity of its elements, it is more open to external acts. One goal for sure would be to analyze every origin of cultural tradition more deeply: after all it could be said that no culture exists independently, or free comparison to at least one other, «in this sense it can be said that every culture makes itself only as interculture, that is as result – in every step of its genesis and development – of cultural exchanges»¹.

The Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaró, as cited by Marcello Ghilardi, highlighted this very sentiment:

to explain how every identity is never isolated or independent, but always related with all the others; [...] we are not talking about "A is not-A" but rather "A-because-not-A is A". [...] Nishida does not mean to break the law of noncontradiction, but put it into perspective, because he recognizes it as unfit for understanding the reality; he does not mean to break grammatical rules "A is not not-A" and "B is not-A", otherwise he should drop rational argument. He rather tries to make a thought where A is not only A, and not-A is not only not-A. A and not-A simply are two different faces of the same thing. A is A and not-A is not-A, but none of them is real whether they are not member of themselves at the same time.²

¹ G. Pasqualotto: Intercultura e globalizzazione in Id. (edited by), *Per una filosofia interculturale*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis 2008, pp. 15-34, p. 15.

² M. Ghilardi: *Pensare l'identità in Giappone: intercultura come trasformazione*, in: G. Pasqualotto (edited by), *Per una filosofia interculturale*, cit., pp. 213-254, pp. 241-243.

Transposed on a cultural level, this idea means that no independent or fixed culture can exist without relationships with others; the opposition standing between cultures is just a «mutual determination relationship». But thinking about traditions as independent systems involves a hierarchy of cultures, where the balance of power rewards cultural identities with the strongest tradition. If every cultural element were without comparison (of similarity or difference), then every single piece would be reneged inside the pluricultural framework, in particular the intercultural. After all, inside the suffix *inter*, there is the dynamic examination of exchanges and interactions between cultural systems.

To answer the question “Does something specifically intercultural exist?” is to say that if something cultural has to exist, for identity or difference, it will be intercultural at the same time. Therefore, what role can be played by philosophy in this context? Philosophies are for sure one of the most significant and relevant cultural products, because they characterize traditions without identifying themselves with them, leading to one philosophy, at least, for one culture. If we don’t want to be judged as talking through our hats about philosophies, in fact we are required to try and break a habit, at first psychologically and linguistically, but subsequently, that identifies only the western tradition with the term “philosophy”, marginalizing everything that was not developed under the auspices of Greece first and Europe and USA later, as philosophical subproducts and/or superstitions.

It makes sense to speak of intercultural philosophy but not of philosophy in general, because only specifications go in singular (European/Indian/Chinese philosophy etc.), while it would be better speaking of philosophies when it is understood as a general doctrine: «'Philosophies' because it concerns, as I it always has and always will, a multiple vision – we cannot limit it to any one

vision of philosophy; even less, to a 'pre-eminent' philosophy»³. This would be a great starting point which would lead to equal dignity for every philosophical system, now on the same level as the other. In return this would pave an interpretation of relationships truly intercultural. It is actually the relationship that changes philosophy into intercultural philosophy, revealing it as an open problematic field between two or more elements that are, although still compared, at least now on the same level.

Giangiorgio Pasqualotto did an excellent job in describing how it should be a practical to create a working intercultural system, and he did it trying to show the difference between comparative philosophy and philosophy as comparison (then intercultural). Where humanities are concerned there still is a widespread conviction that the comparing subject cannot be influenced or partially influence the comparison outcome, this creating the myths of an impartial comparing subject and an impartial comparison itself. Pasqualotto denies this possibility, pointing not only to the subject's impact on what they compare, but also the partiality of the relationship elements. In the humanities – and more specifically in intercultural comparison or research – an uncontaminated and objective comparison cannot and will not exist. The different poles are interdependent, not generating a closed background where no dialogue is allowed, but an open, problematic (in a positive way) field where every subject knows their position *inter res*, opening new and wide perspectives and influencing in an active and decisive way the life of those concerned in the relationship:

³ Unesco, *Philosophy: a school of freedom. Teaching philosophy and learning to philosophize: status and prospects*, Paris, 2007, URL: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001541/154173e.pdf>, last check 06/08/2015, p. 239.

like the comparing subject is influenced by the comparison activity because the compared elements – especially thanks to the comparison – give off unedited answers to given problems, so the compared elements are modified by the subject comparative activity, because they answer to this questions.⁴

Philosophy as comparison (not yet comparative) is the first step that interculturality must take to embrace philosophy, accepting at the same time the partiality of every point of view and consequently the impossibility of any tradition to dominate another. The second step, which has to follow immediately, is then admitting that every culture's axiological equality, without possibility of making hierarchy or submissions, levels every unmotivated pretension of superiority and accepts everybody's peculiarities. Relationship and equality are the corner stones not only of interculturality but especially that of intercultural philosophy. There cannot be helpful cultural connection without mutuality of positions or equality without comparison.

This is not to be meant as relativism, but instead as a new concept of "relationism", for what

is it true that every point of view, because subjective, is relative but is even more true that it gets more aware of being necessarily and always beyond its pure subjectivity when it realizes of being composed of relationships.⁵

The dichotomous concept of relationships has to be overcome for it always fosters the closest element to the comparing subject. In return it has to leave the Hegelian ghost (often unconscious) of a comparison between other-ness in which the subject aims only to return to himself, even in case of auto-perfectionism. Obviously this kind of relationship is more preferable than

⁴ G. Pasqualotto: La comparazione tra Oriente e Occidente, in: *FILOSOFIA POLITICA*, a. XVIII, n. 1, april 2004, pp. 65-77, p. 72.

⁵ G. Pasqualotto: Dalla prospettiva della filosofia comparata all'orizzonte della filosofia interculturale, in: Id. (edited by), *Per una filosofia interculturale*, cit., pp. 35-57, p. 48. Cf. also Id., *La comparazione fra Oriente e Occidente*, cit., p. 69, note 9.

others less “emphatic”, but its ego-referred consequences would misrepresent the universalistic pretension⁶ of every philosophical system (which is right when it is not meant as will of predominance over or above the others):

if we stay inside of a two variables logic, it always stands the suspect that the subjective variable will be protagonist, even when it allows to be put in discussion by the strongest and declares of giving up with every sign of «reduction to itself». On the contrary, if we choose the three variables situation, the subject pretensions will be reduced by the objectivity of the problematic space, of the vital field produced and fed by processual realities of the problems which define the conditions of possibility of the relationship.⁷

Rethinking the connection between philosophical traditions as a three variables relationship and appropriating of that gnoseological modesty⁸ for there is no cultural hierarchy, philosophy can be redirected towards the intercultural path, a direction that is suitable for it and proliferates numerous and positive changes, both theoretical and practical. As for the first one, interculturality would guarantee philosophy so much more analytic depth, allowing it to clear the stratified interlacements between the roots of different philosophies, highlighting significant knots ignored until now or bent to exalt Western thought. This would also affect the chance to place more accurately any thought inside the new philosophical universe, where every tradition will be on the same level as the others, and the relations, present or past, determine

⁶ «The universalistic pretension of the “Western” philosophical thought is contested for its inability in theming and understanding the issues that contemporary polyphony and polylogic rise, inability due to its assertive character and little ready to a dialogue not express in its terms» (A. Chiricosta, *Filosofia interculturale e valori asiatici*, Varese, O Barra O Edizioni, 2013, p. 12). The aim is leaving this kind of conception and finally considering «a situated universality that can be inflected plurally: a “universal in context”» (Ivi, p. 13).

⁷ G. Pasqualotto: *La comparazione fra Oriente e Occidente*, cit., pp. 75-76.

⁸ Cf. R.A. Mall: *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen. Interkulturelle Philosophie – eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1995.

changeable reference points for every cultural identity⁹. As for the practical aspect, this new philosophical intercultural orientation would be useful in terms of new ethical-political perspectives aimed at integration, acknowledgement, and the respect of differences (one could suggest for instance that there is usually never a serene debate about the universality of human rights), and, above all, it could be translated onto a pedagogical level, in accordance with the intercultural direction took by schools thirty years ago. Moreover, the redefinition of the subject in an intercultural way would allow the reconciliation with one of the peculiarities, now even more defined during the latter centuries: philosophy as an attitude. Even if it is universally belied that the more academic the subject is, then this supposedly guarantees it a scientific and checked development, on the other hand an hypertrophy of this aspect has lead it to forget its universal presence.

It will only be down to a re-thinking of these two moments, academic and universal – not opposite or separated – that will give the right worth to philosophy as an attitude. In Italy we say “to take something with philosophy” in this sense, which means to relax and be stoic. However and it must be ardently stressed, thinking of philosophy as an attitude is not easy. This is probably due to the idea of philosophy and the way it has been inherited from one generation to another, and how its academic meaning prevails. One’s ability to critique, the analytic thought and that rational sensitivity, typically philosophical, are a universal heritage we must promote and develop. Those are both the basic but fundamental elements of a citizen’s awareness of belonging to a greater part. This feeling of citizenship is able to largely contribute to the resolution of many present conflicts.

⁹ A wonderful cartographic example of this is represented by E. Holenstein, *Philosophie-Atlas: Orte und Wege des Denkens*, Ammann Verlag, Zürich 2004.

The real intercultural philosophy begins with that gnoseological modesty conceived by Mall, where every tradition has equal relevance to the others interrelated (or to be interrelated) by difference or commonality. Beyond the effects aforementioned, adopting such a perspective could have positive repercussions on the perception of philosophy as an attitude, or better still, a critical openness to the other-ness. That is why intercultural philosophy is not a proper research field but a predisposition. It will need to revolutionize philosophical thinking in this direction, as then the didactics and the thought will process again, in a virtuous cycle well described by Morin.¹⁰

Starting from these considerations, it is possible to conjecture a re-thinking of the traditional scholastic subject “history of philosophy” in the sense of a “history of philosophies”. Specifically, Italian secondary school adopts a philosophical syllabus according to the skills development demanded by U E 2020 program (Europe 2020)¹¹. There are general and common rules for each address where philosophy is taught, with more specific rules because of the demands put in place by the schools and what subjects need to be stressed in the curriculum. Yet in common profile it is possible to change traditional syllabuses, as understood in this opening paragraph:

¹⁰ What is meant here is what Morin calls “cycling causality” and applies to the pedagogical area: «The strongest concept is that of self-regenerating or recursive ring, where the effects and the products get necessary to the production and to the cause that caused and produced them. An evident example of this kind of ring are we ourselves, who are products of a biological reproducing cycle in which we will become producers» (E. Morin, *Insegnare a vivere. Manifesto per cambiare l'educazione*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore 2015, p. 75).

¹¹ «Europe 2020 is the European Union’s ten-year jobs and growth strategy. It was launched in 2010 to create the conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth» (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-anutshell/index_en.htm, last check on 08/18/2015). In this program converged all the recommendations about education and instruction formerly included in the Lisbon Strategy.

at the end of the high school time the student should be awake of the meaning of the philosophical thought as *peculiar and fundamental part of human reason* which, in different periods and *different cultural traditions*, steadily propose again the question about knowledge, human being and the meaning of being. Moreover he should know in an organic way, *the fundamental knots in historical development of Western thought*, contextualizing every author or theme in a historical-cultural framework and also the *potentially universalistic reach that every philosophy has*.¹²

How can philosophy have both a universalistic method and specific practice without teaching its relationship with the otherness that helped define itself? How can someone talk of Western thought without at least citing the general developments of the oriental or southern one? If the advice for the syllabus openly talks about “the reach that every philosophy has” we cannot ignore the fact anymore that more philosophies should be more accessible, instead of the imbibing Western philosophy, which dominates the present Italian syllabus. In response to the intransigents, Rosario Diana commented:

does this mean that we should be ready to change what Harold Bloom calls “the Western canon”, that is the list (made by his own) of the writers become immortals by authority, genius and originality? [...] Will Kant vanish, replaced by Confucio, or Manzoni replaced by The Arabian nights? [...] What said until now nothing has to do with the important work of unmasking every ethnocentric hybris, still alive and acting in many fields of knowledge. Changing the Homeric epic with the Indian one in the syllabus would be unfair for both of them, because the question is not to put the second one in the place of the first one but, if anything, to show both of them in a way that the student could understand that our narration is not the configuration that only existed in the world. It is one beside the others, but it is also ours: actually this claim of belonging will be made more incisive by the awareness and the acknowledgment of other similar stories of the origins.¹³

¹² http://www.indire.it/lucabas/lkmw_file/licei2010///FILOSOFIA_prof.unico.pdf (last check on 06/22/2015), italics mine.

¹³ R. Diana, F. Specchio: Humanities per una società interculturale. Un contributo teorico-pratico, in G. Cacciatore, G. D’Anna, R. Diana, F. Santoianni (edited by), Per una relazione interculturale. Prospettive interdisciplinari, Milano-Udine, Mimesis 2012, pp. 135-149, pp. 140-141.

This would be an arduous such as pleasant journey between philosophies, able to explain the mutual inferences, stress the exchanges and the encounters, underline the elements of commonality and difference, both explicit and less superficial: this will affect in no way the subject, nor, in time, in its contents (on the contrary). As for the first case, the majority of professors mourn an insufficient availability of hours to explain different syllabuses, which often leads to tormented cuts of essential authors and/or schools of thought: nevertheless, at least as the first part of inserting intercultural philosophy in secondary schools is concerned, it is possible to imagine some integrations in specific moments of the didactic path. For example, Arabic philosophy, starting from the 9th century commentators, were even sacrificing originality to make their philosophy more “functional” to the Western thought development. Furthermore and little closer to home, what about the clashing between of German, Japanese and Chinese philosophy in the 18th century? Finally, let’s not brush aside the postcolonial developments of the African philosophy after WWII. In Italy, the fifth year high school syllabus comes after a biennium strictly programmed – it is the only one that can enable professors to insert their own personal touch. Here, an urgent rethinking in an intercultural way is desperately needed, for such freedom is often meant but not delivered. However, the blame cannot always be levied at the professor doorstep, but instead also goes to failings at an institutional level, either due to a mismanagement, bad management or no management at all. This grey area that has now ensued, has caused many of the most innovative and interesting ideas of the XX century to be completely lost.

Having an intercultural philosophical attitude is not that different from what happens on an intracultural level: during any historiographic analysis, a sequence of thinkers is reviewed looking for those shades of cultures that have

produced a specific cultural system; cultures that are not different from ours, differ at least in time, if not in contents.

These are only a few examples of the many (more specific and even interdisciplinary models are given in the numerous volumes about our relationships with the “other” thoughts), models that would represent a significant change not only in the didactics, but also in the students’ perception, making them aware of the plurality that embraces and affects them at the same time¹⁴, saving the meaning of philosophy as attitude. I have attempted to illustrate that such an approach, adopted on an international scale, would also have as a further consequences an advancement or at least a renewal of the subject, the teaching of which would generally be in crisis, even in a high formative development zone like Italy. According to the latest results of an UNESCO survey¹⁵, this crisis would be probably caused by the inability of the subject to read and understand our reality. Intercultural philosophy is an exclusive lens with which we can observe, understand and modify the fabric of those distinct and intertwined pluralities which are most definitely outlining the new global horizon.

¹⁴ Not just an external plurality, but also internal to the students themselves, who rationally have to choose every day an identity to wear (cf. A. Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Penguin Books, India 2007).

¹⁵ *Supra* note 3.

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