

THE PRIMACY OF QUESTION AND THE TASK OF INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

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I

The question of one and the many which is among other things a central problem in philosophy seems to have gone beyond merely concepts and categories. Primarily, one would say that the part and the whole or the universal and the particular has assumed a more complex dimension because it is no longer about objects and things but a plurality of human beings, cultural forms, philosophies, modes of reflections, thinking values and norms. These are no longer issues bordered within a particular tradition, culture, space and time; rather globalisation is restructuring our immediate grasp of reality and positing multiple sides of reality. Such that the former immediate grasp of reality that shape philosophical questions within such bordered spaces are only assuming just a part of a whole reality. Hence, dealing with pluralism is not simply a task of philosophy (Berlin, Concepts and Categories, 1999) but its challenge. Wimmer would certainly be right, that if philosophy is to provide answers to its original question, its method and orientation must change. The alternative method or orientation one may say, is intercultural philosophy. However, what does one imply by interculturally oriented philosophy and what does philosophy need to be intercultural? Any viable answer should presuppose the notion of interculturality and consequently what primacy of question has to do with intercultural philosophy.

II

On the idea of Interculturality

In everyday life, in the media and academic circles the term interculturality has assumed a conventional use. In fact, it has become one of the buzzwords in the emergence of globalisation and its consequences. One hears expressions like intercultural dance, intercultural music, intercultural centre, intercultural evening among others. In some cases, it has been used as a substitute for international. It is now used to refer to activities where different cultures perform. The notion of culture has a complex historical development in the West because the notion depends on the hegemonic relationship between the West and the rest. However, this historical complexity cannot explain the simultaneous change and permanence in culture. Moreover, within this historical development of the notion of culture, one discovers that it has elements of hegemonic centrism. Hence, the possibility of interculturality that rejects absolute and dogmatic position about reality and the questions it poses must interpret culture as interrogative results. It should have the capacity to capture and explain the inner dialectics inherent in culture as a concept and as a way of life. This is important to understand what Panikkar means; when he argued that interculturality is neither one (single) culture nor a disconnected plurality but a complete form of human culture.

Both the prefix 'inter' and the suffix 'cultural' signifies more than mere performance or presence of different cultures in a program or project. That means interculturality is not a combination of cultures. 'Intercultural is not an 'appendage' such that whatever it is appended to automatically becomes intercultural. Though there are cultural exchanges because of global processes, however, this exchange is either cross-cultural or transcultural, both of which

are merely descriptive and possibly without normative implications. Interculturality is both descriptive because it describes a particular form of cultural encounter and normative because it has a normative consequence. The 'inter' in 'intercultural' means a meeting of or encounter as something inherent in 'culture.' If culture is a noun, cultural is the adjective, which moves one into a realm of difference (Appadurai, 1996:12). Furthermore, as Mall rightly observed, much of what we do in the name of intercultural studies today is oriented from the perspective of Western thought and shows signs of the West's asymmetry and hegemony. This one-sidedness is the result of historical contingency that made European thought the main paradigm of reference (Mall, 2000:13). Consequently, every other intellectual or philosophical perspective is viewed as a footnote to European thought. Indeed, one may not separate European thought as a reference point from the historical hegemony of Europe in their encounter with other cultures. Subsequently, interculturality will have to deconstruct the hegemonic structures, if it will realise its task as articulated by Mall. According to Mall, interculturality rejects the claim of supremacy of one culture; of one value, or method of thinking over others. It rejects the domination of one culture over the other. Mall argues, interculturality is a mental and philosophical attitude that accompanies every cultural configuration of the *philosophia perennis*, preventing it from absolutising itself. Therefore, interculturally oriented philosophy will have to deconstruct the conception of otherness by which other philosophical traditions are to be encountered on their own terms.

Furthermore, interculturality could be dialogue or polylogue but it is never a monologue. The term interculturality, Mall articulates, is neither a trendy expression nor compensation for non-Western cultures that is born out of

inferiority complex. It is not just a move made while confronting the actual cultural encounters today (Mall, 2006:134). Interculturality is tolerant to plurality and seeks for overlapping structures that make communication across traditions and cultures possible while it at the same time allow each to retain its individual character (Mall, 2000:6). It means a plural understanding of cultures, values and methods and modes of thinking. As a result, since pluralism is not only the task of philosophy but its challenge, an interculturally oriented philosophy will have a 'Pluralitätsfähigkeit' i.e. plurality ability. This is important for intercultural philosophy to realise the task assigned it, namely: to mediate between the universal question of philosophy and cultural contingencies of the answers that form the bedrock of world philosophies.

Additionally, interculturality is not the same thing as consensus. Nicholas Rescher rightly claims, "consensus is a matter of agreement" (Rescher, 1993:5). Consensus theory builds on the idea of one truth, one good and one morality. It claims that philosophical argumentation must yield a convergence of answers. The difficulty is not whether there is one universal truth, good and morality. Rather, the difficulty is how do we reach this universal truth, and whose truth. For the first part of the difficulty, Kant assumes that consensus as a touchstone of truth is rooted in reason or rationality. One may ask in the words of Alasdair Macintyre (1988) which rationality? Indeed, it appears that by the universalisation of the concept, it is taken for granted that what it means and the answers to the question it raises are already decided. Clearly, within the European or American philosophy its meaning and implications are still contested. Therefore, the question of the concept of rationality remains open. In fact, in a situation where the concept itself has a one-sided interpretation an intercultural orientation will necessarily imply seeking the meaning of the

concept of rationality within different cultures. Nevertheless, it does not seem that taking such approach will likely lead to a consensus about truth, whether epistemic, cognitive or moral. Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas considered consensus as something inherent in communication. This might be the case, but communication must be grounded in understanding. Consensus as agreement seems different from understanding. People may agree without understanding and understand without agreeing (Rancière, 1999). Clearly, a person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said. The person must understand what is said as an answer to a question (Gadamer, 2003:270). Here lies the principle of understanding in communication. Communication aims more at understanding rather than mere consensus. Moreover, consensus as a product of rational argumentation has nothing to do with truth. Rational argumentation is about setting up a premise and arguing to establish the truth of the premise. In such a setup, people argue to win or argue their co-arguers down. Gadamer maintains that in a dialogue or polylogue situation, one allows oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the participants are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other down. Rather, Gadamer continues, it entails that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion (Gadamer, 2003:367). Following this argument, interculturality is not consensus.

Besides, interculturality is neither comparativity nor complementarity. Comparisons run the risk of evaluation and to evaluate a standard is required. The dilemma will then be who sets the standard and by what criteria. Complementarity also runs the risk of instrumentalising the other. According to Levinas, the existence of the 'other' does not concern us by reason of his or her power and freedom which we should have to subjugate and utilize for

ourselves (Lévinas, 1994: 89). Nevertheless, though Lévinas believe in the absolute otherness of the other, interculturality is not pure alterity. Rather, it is an in-between, because there can be no absolute otherness, the self and the other are different in some ways and same in some other ways.

Thus, interculturality does not just describe today's cultural encounters but offers the norms that could characterize such encounters for better understanding across cultures. Hence, interculturality is descriptive as well as normative. Interculturality is an overlap and space for creativity. It means changing perspectives and positions to see the world differently. Changing perspectives involves the recognition of the other's perspective as having a worth of its own in its own terms. That means interrogating one's culture in the face of another culture. It also means interrogating the other culture in the face of one's culture. In each case, it requires that the 'other' be allowed to respond to the questions.

Therefore, central to the goal of interculturality is the deconstruction of otherness and subsequently, deconstructing the existing intellectual hegemony in philosophy. Ancillary to this deconstruction task is the necessity for a pluralitätsfähigkeit on the part of philosophy. Both the task of deconstruction and pluralitätsfähigkeit requires primacy of question.

This paper argues for the primacy of question as a constitutive element of intercultural philosophy.

III

On the Primacy of Question

Philosophy as an inquiry begins with reflection on its contents not so much about the method of thinking and argumentation that is involved. This is so because the arguments or methods are only ancillary. Moreover, the notion of thinking and logical inferences whether formal or informal are not yet settled. For instance, what does one do when one thinks? How do we distinguish a thinking process that is philosophical from the one that is not philosophical? These issues are not addressed in this paper. Rather, the present paper builds on the claim that question is the primary off-shoot of philosophy.

In the works of some African and African American philosophers, one finds the distinction made between philosophy born out of wonder in the historicity of philosophy in the West and that born of struggle or frustration in the historicity of philosophy in African America and Africa respectively (Harris, 2002; Chimakonam, 2015:4-9). In contrast, one may argue that the simple act of wonder or mere feeling of frustration is not the philosophy itself. In fact, wonder can end in admiration and struggles or frustration may also end in despair. However, philosophy begins, when wonder begets questions and frustration lead to questioning. In other words, philosophy begins when human beings start to pose question on the realities that confront them. In this sense, 'I wonder why the sky is blue' becomes different from 'the wonder of the blue sky feels me with awe or admiration.' In the same manner, 'I am frustrated with being enslaved or colonised' will be different from 'I wonder why I should be made a slave, denied my status as a human being, colonised and stripped of all human dignity.' The latter parts of the two comparisons are the beginning of reflection. In both wonder and frustration, the human person is confronted with

a reality that generates questions. The search for an answer to these questions gives rise to philosophical thoughts. Using Gadamer's analysis, wonder and frustration are elements of the experience of a historical conscious subject. Hence, as he affirms, "we cannot have experience without asking questions" (Gadamer, 2003:362). To question points to 'knowledge of not knowing' and this Gadamer acclaims "opens the true superiority of questioning" (ibid). Questioning challenges all dogmatic and fixed views, it places prejudice and foreknowledge within the brackets of the question. That means, following Gadamer, if every experience involves question primarily and we cannot have the same experience twice, whereby if an experience repeats itself, it implies not necessarily a correction but an extended knowledge not only of the new experience but also of what we know earlier (ibid: 353). Consequently, "as against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid" (ibid: 367). In other words, the nature of question is to make the thing questioned indeterminate because questioning brings out the undetermined possibilities of a thing (ibid: 375). In fact, "to ask a question means to bring into open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be undetermined, awaiting a decisive answer" (ibid: 365). Because, question is the basis of knowledge, it has priority over it and to question presupposes that one do not know and must necessarily wish to know (ibid: 363). The indeterminacy of answers to question and that to question presuppose the desire to know contrast with some other views on the structure of question. For instance, Hamblin (1958) claims that knowing a question, that is, asking the correct question is equivalent to knowing what counts as an answer. He shares this view with Polanyi (1958), who maintains that a thinker approaches a problem with the assumption that the answer is there. There are possible ways of understanding both positions

in relation to Gadamer. The problem that arises from Hamblin's argument is genuine. The problem that seems to give legitimacy to Hamblin's claim is that one must know the answer to one's question to know when the answer is given. Indeed, if question opens the way to knowledge, if question arises because there is something in one's experience that challenges one's previous experience, then one must ask to know. Therefore, it cannot be the case that one must necessarily know the answer to one's question, whether one is asking oneself or the other. In the case of Polanyi, indeed there must be an answer to a question but this answer is undetermined. One finds traces of question as an access to knowledge in Socratic dialogue as presented by Plato. In other words, firstly, to seek knowledge whether of reality, morality or knowledge as such, which is the concern of philosophy has the structure of question. Secondly, dialogue is enacted within the structures of question. Therefore, if interculturality necessarily involves dialogue or polylogue, there is a primacy of question.

One can say that questioning provides the creative space for Interculturality. The logic of question and answer is the avenue to achieve interculturality. The needed dialogue or polylogue is enacted through question and answer because dialogue or polylogue has an interrogative structure. Interculturality means approaching difference as something that gives meaning across boundary (Blasco & Gustafsson, 2004). In consequence, this meaning requires questioning. The logic of question and answer makes communication possible. In fact, it makes interculturality a continuous communication.

IV

The Primacy of Question and Interculturality of Philosophy

The cultural contingency of thought, philosophers and philosophy, in general, is the normative ground of intercultural philosophy. Thus, For Wimmer (2014), intercultural philosophy is fundamental to every thinking that acknowledges this cultural contingency. Hence, in view of the primacy of question in intercultural philosophy, this paper agrees with Mall, that rather than concentrating on philosophical answers, concentrating on the questions that gave rise to the answers is more promising.

The nature of philosophy rejects the idea of a consensus; there cannot be agreement on the concepts, with which it concerns itself. Moreover, as already argued, the fact that consensus tends to operate on a one-sidedly defined concept and assumes a dogmatic uniformity, it contradicts the main task of intercultural philosophy.

Intercultural philosophy is not complementarities of world philosophies, for the reasons indicated earlier. It is not a comparative philosophy since for a comparative to take place there is always the slippery slope of looking for standard of comparison. It is not a philosophy of pure alterity of other philosophies. Alterity lay emphasis on the absolute otherness of world philosophies, the globalising processes of knowledge, and mobility in which realities are being encountered from different perspectives, intermingling of thought and hybrid structures in thinking and knowledge production makes an absolute otherness of philosophies unthinkable.

It is not simply about equal consideration of world philosophies as bearer of partial or complete truth about the subjects of philosophy because it would entail getting into the whole difficulties of equality and terms of equality or even extreme relativism.

Rather, the primacy of question (structured or unstructured) is central to intercultural philosophy. The hypothesis is that since philosophies constitute efforts to answer questions, then the task of intercultural philosophy is to ask questions about the questions for which world philosophies seek to answer than the answers. Indeed, "no work of philosophy can be understood until the reader knows the question to which the text is intended as an answer" (Collingwood, 1939: 31, 55). In the same, no philosophical tradition, especially in those traditions that have no written text, can be understood, until the hearer or the intercultural philosopher knows the question for which what is said is intended to be an answer. The voice that speaks to us from the past poses a question. In order to answer the question, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions. We can say that we understand only when we understand the question to which 'the voice' is the answer (Gadamer, 2003:374).

However much a person trying to understand may leave open the truth of what is said, however much he may dismiss the immediate meaning of the object and consider its deeper significance instead, and take the latter not as true but merely as meaningful, so that the possibility of its truth remains unsettled, this is the real and fundamental nature of a question: namely to make things indeterminate. Questions

always bring out the indeterminate possibilities of a thing. ...
Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning (Gadamer,
2003:374 - 375).

Subsequently, we must stress something clearly, and that is the person trying to understand would have to leave open the truth of what is said. Rather, s/he should aim at uncovering the deeper meaning of that which is "said" in the philosophical tradition of some cultures or the cultural other. This is so because, "the possibility of its truth remains unsettled." Thus, question as primary in intercultural philosophy makes things "indeterminate" and, brings out "indetermined possibilities" for all that are concerned with regards to understanding the matter at stake. The matter at stake includes but not limited to methods and concepts. Besides, to understand what is said is to understand it as the answer to a question. This question is the concern of intercultural philosophy. It is through knowing this question can we hermeneutically understand the historical development of philosophies of the world without using one's concepts, and methods to judge the historicity and methodology of philosophy in other traditions. This is so because the dissimilarities could be a matter of concepts and language. However, this does not delineate the fact that the person seeking meaning or understanding is no longer a 'historically affected consciousness' (Gadamer, 2003:376). This means that we are situated. The notion of situation implies that we are not standing outside our philosophical and cultural traditions. Consequently, we are unable to have objective knowledge of it; not because of deficiency in reflection, but, due to our historical situatedness (Gadamer, 2003: 300 – 302).

The primacy of question presupposes suspension of prejudice and judgement. The formation of prejudice and stereotypes is based on the process of categorisation, thus, for example, black is a category, and stereotypes are the images that add bias to the category (Cristoffanini, 2004). "Categorization of human beings is made principally through a key, semiotic system: language allows us to present people, groups, and happenings in simplified or enriched forms, in prejudiced or tolerant ways" (ibid: 85). To be noted is that the 'other' is not a mere object to be assumed under one's categories and given a place in one's world. Rather, the 'other' inhabits a world that is fundamentally other than and which is essentially different (Lévinas, 1969: 13). Thus, categorisations run the tendency of stereotyping the 'other.' Once there are stereotypes, the possibility of productive and communicative encounter is hindered. Stereotypes could destroy the autonomy of the cultural 'other.' Recognition in the intercultural understanding of the 'other,' calls for listening rather than imposing meaning on the 'other.'

Hence, suspension of prejudice demands that all previous knowledge be confronted by the question. It offers a condition of openness to the other. Indeed, it takes into consideration Wimmer's observation that the other is silenced before its voice is heard in the historicity of philosophy. Hence, in questioning by which the answer is not determined, intercultural philosophy creates the possibility of becoming aware of the otherness of the 'other;' "the indissoluble individuality of the other person" (Gadamer, 2003: 305).

The 'other' refers to that which is other than what is already meant. It includes among others cultures, opinions, ideas, beliefs, philosophies, etc. "If culture is about collective identities, then such identification depends on the existence of

something 'other,' against which the self can be posited" (Blasco & Gustafsson, 2004:13). The consciousness of this 'other' arises from differentiation. Hence, we are not just different (self); we are different from something 'other.' Thus, the making of difference is the foundation of otherness. Otherness is identified as difference opposed to sameness. The 'other' is that 'other' that does not think eat, look, and laugh the way one does.

The concept of 'self' and 'other' might be collective like 'us' and 'them.' In constituting the 'other' whether, as individual-other or the collective-other, there is a simultaneous understanding of 'self,' whether as individual-'self' or a collective-'self.' In the intellectual works of some Western thinkers, their construction of the 'other' has a consequence on the claim Europe make on the history of philosophy, method and mode of thinking or reflection. Thinkers such as Hegel, Kant and some others not only elevate abstract reason above humanity itself but they ascribe this reason to a particular humanity that is masculine and European. Consequently, the other in question, that is, the feminine and non-European can neither reason nor critically think. The result is the exclusion, from the on-set anything other than masculine and European from the intellectual stream. The result in the contemporary era is the exclusive definition of what reason or rationality is; what critical thinking is. The result is, either the excluded other meets this one-sided understanding of 'rationality, and critical thinking' or it is taken as not reasoning and critically thinking at all.

The task of intercultural philosophy is not necessarily changing the matter of philosophy but deconstructing this hegemonic mindset that supposes that it can express the totality of the human experience just with concepts of one

particular culture (Wimmer, 2004: 145). The 'other' must be recognised as a partner in creating meaning.

In engaging with the 'other,' intercultural orientation and, in this case, intercultural philosophy entails changing perspectives. Therefore where the task assigned to intercultural philosophy is to find a liminal space between absolute dogmatic universalism and indifferent ethnocentric relativism, it follows that the liminal space is created within the structures of question. This implies, transposing ourselves by which we rise to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. This universality is undetermined just as the answer to a question is undetermined. Consequently, a question brings what is questioned to the open and places it in a particular perspective. The openness of what is in a question consists in the fact that the answer is undetermined (Gadamer, 2003).

V

Conclusion

Therefore, questioning from an intercultural perspective provides the ground for an authentic polylogue among world philosophies in the light of the contemporary reconstellation of philosophical problems. The idea of intercultural philosophy also implies not simply an acknowledgement of world philosophies, of which necessitates pluralism of philosophies. Rather, intercultural philosophy with the tool of primacy of question contrary to consensus, comparativity, complementarity and alterity, should possess plurality ability to live with dissensus; search for understanding. To reach an understanding is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and effectively asserting one's own point of view. Rather, it is a process of transformation into

a communion in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer, 2003:378). Asking questions protects the questioner from making the mistake of assuming his/her cultural basis as a given standard. One could say that Questioning liberates the interrogator from the fixity of stereotypes and prejudices. in asking questions, we recognise the cultural other as a subject, a partner, a qualified source of information especially about the subject matters – himself/herself and his/her culture.

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