

# When is philosophy intercultural? Outlooks and perspectives

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## 1. When is philosophy intercultural?

First of all: "intercultural philosophy" is in fact a tautology. Because philosophizing always takes place in an in-between of cultures, philosophies, and religions. This is why I'd rather read the question of the conference "When is philosophy intercultural?" as "How and why is philosophy intercultural?"

Philosophy as a cultural product always expresses a specific "philosophical culture". As it always takes place and develops in the centre of a critical discourse between different "philosophical cultures", it is as such always "inter-cultural". This is about pluralities there are several "cultures of philosophy" at work within the same "culture of philosophy". There are, for example, many different philosophical cultures within the "one" German philosophy – like Hegel and Schopenhauer. And only philosophical positions with a claim to absoluteness would take that fact as an offense.

The recent situation of hermeneutics is defined through a fourfold hermeneutical dialectic: First of all the understanding of Europe through Europe's eyes, i.e. the European self-hermeneutics. Secondly, the European understanding of non-European cultures, philosophies, religions, etc.; i.e. its extrinsic hermeneutics. Thirdly, the self-concept of those non-European cultures, philosophies, religions; i.e. their respective self-hermeneutics. And, eventually, the concept of Europe as seen by Non-European cultures, philosophies, and religions.

It's essentially in this situation, that the very question confronts us: Who understands whom "better" or "best", and why, and how? And as such: *When and how is philosophy intercultural?*

The European mind has often presented itself with the self-inflicted claim to understanding the non-European mind better than the non-European mind would understand itself. The fact that, today, non-Europeans interpret Europe, shows the thoroughly monologuous character of the centuries-old European hermeneutics. This “*having-become-interpretable*” of Europe through Non-Europe is of course more of a surprise to Europe than to the rest of the world. This issue has to be provided for by some philosophy.

Thus, I would like to answer the question “When is philosophy intercultural?” as follows: philosophy is intercultural whenever an attitude speaks from it that would avoid *absolutizing* its own position, i.e. the singular answer, and instead recognize and accept its own origins as being one amongst many positions, following the principle of located *placelessness*.

The renowned religious philosopher Mircea Eliade (in *The Search for the Origins*) put it like this: “I have often pointed out: Western philosophy [and I would add, *mutatis mutandis*, this counts for all philosophies alike] cannot move endlessly only within its own traditions, without eventually becoming provincial.”

## **2. What concept lies behind the term “interculturalism”?**

The concept of interculturalism is directed against a universalisation of one specific culture (philosophy, religion, culture of thought). Interculturalism is not a trans-cultural instance. The term does not point to any kind of *trans-* concept, but instead aims at the searching and finding of overlaps, intersections, common grounds. *Difference* is the basic experience. This basic experience is the focus of the concept of interculturalism.

In the political reading, interculturalism is the name of a democratic and pluralistic approach that looks for discourse, that promotes exchange, that has no fear of the arbitrary. That's because it stresses each respective position, conviction, or reading, but brings those into dialogue with the other. The political reading assumes that even political wisdom is not the sole property of any specific party or lobby, group, or ideology.

The practice of intercultural philosophy is not a specific theory. It's not a discipline, a convention, or a school, but it offers an orientation within the practice of philosophizing. Interculturalism in the sense of an intercultural philosophy is a position, an attitude, that accompanies each process of philosophizing, respectively. Philosophy is intercultural *whenever* it reflects upon its own doings, whenever it puts itself into perspective and integrates into the indisputable plurality and diversity of truths and spellings.

From this position stems a self transforming process that shows the philosopher both as being committed to a *philosophia perennis*, and as remaining constantly in an open process of questioning and philosophizing. Interculturalism points to the inescapable encounter of cultures and, consequently, to the encounter of cultures of *thought*. This shows: the *intra*-cultural is also always *intercultural*.

Interculturalism is a concept that shows how everything depends on how we deal with differences, not on how we overcome them.

### **3. The concept of interculturalism is subject to many different interpretations. Whence the ambiguity of this term?**

Intercultural philosophy, as interculturalism, is itself subject to differences and changes; it is subject to that same fourfold hermeneutic dialectics. Equally, the term of interculturalism has to resist both its instrumentalisation by the politics of the day ("Intercultural Competence", "Diversity Management"), as well as it has to stand up to several misunderstandings. One of these misunderstandings, for example, is the belief that interculturalism would point merely to the non-European, or would merely stand for the intention to translate a somehow strange issue into something of its own.

On one hand, the concept of interculturalism is undergoing a healthy, dynamic development, as it stays abreast of the events of the day and is subject to an ongoing discourse. On the other hand, it is just as necessary to avoid reducing the concept as such to a mere reaction to, or construction of, the political phenomena of the day.

The approach to interculturalism that I have chosen leads towards a tolerant pluralism. This concept is therefore not just about some kind of *correctness*, may it be of the philosophical, cultural, political, or religious kind. Rather, the idea points to an epistemological comprehension of that *de facto* pluralistic, but not non-committing or even arbitrary, structure within thinking, feeling, and the will. The project that is behind the concept of interculturalism is in fact the cultivation of a renouncement of the absolutization, the universalisation, or the supremacy of one's own position of thought. And as such, it is indeed quite tangible. Using this comprehension to lift the concept of culturalism out of its ambiguity and abstractness, is therefore a sign of the self transforming process of the philosopher.

#### **4. The international interrelations of many societal spheres increasingly provoke a clash of different cultures. Could this be a reason why intercultural philosophy is now especially important?**

The recent events remind us rather that the conflict that interculturalism points to and which it induces, has not only not been pacified so far, but it may even gain more and more brisance in the future. We are facing the question how we, how individuals, deal with differences.

The project of *intercultural philosophizing* shows an overdue paradigm shift within the current discourse – mainly the discourse of philosophies and religions in the philosophical context of the world. A paradigm shift that helps us overcome our *well frog perspective*, meaning the lopsidedness and eagerness to absolutise our own perspectives – both inter- and intraculturally. It's true, we are condemned to a point of view. The mistake however would not lie in the fact that we cannot live without a point of view, but it would lie in the fact that we tend to render a specific perspective – namely our own – in terms of absolutes. Holding a position and a conviction is in itself good and just, as long as we understand this position or conviction of ours as being *one amongst many*. This evokes the courage and tolerance to listen to the truth of the others.

The intercultural philosophical attitude aims at a temporal, spatial, and philosophical-historiographical correction thesis. It does not object to *centres*, but to *centrisms*. It also rejects both the fear of arbitrariness and radical relativism, and instead advocates a tolerant pluralism, a considerate relationalism.

Intercultural philosophical orientation looks closely in order to find out what philosophers do whenever they philosophize. Because they all *philosophize*. And they often do different things in the name of philosophy – sometimes radically different things. However, they *nevertheless* philosophize. This kind of *difference* in philosophy is something that *connectively separates* all philosophers, as it also *disjunctively unites* them. This is the overlapping. The courage and tolerant openness to detect and then endure connective overlaps and enlightening differences, have been of crucial importance at all times. It is still, as ever has been, our task to head off into the dawn of a world philosophy, as Jaspers would put it.

##### **5. Where are the limits, and where are the options of intercultural philosophy to take part in present political discourses?**

The limits of intercultural philosophy lie wherever it runs the risk of becoming a construction, a convention, discipline, or reaction. As an attitude that accompanies every philosophical process and thus every discussion and political discourse, it becomes effective wherever we negotiate truths, find consensus or join efforts in finding the meaning of a common spirit. It takes its effects through its renouncement of supremacy, through its eschewal of absolutization, through the modesty of the speaker. This is how the discourse learns its openness and non-violence – the avoidance of both theoretical violence, e.g. as would be any universalization or absolutization of truth (i.e. the claim to absolute truth), and the avoidance of practical violence. Intercultural philosophy seeks to be not more or less than this approach, this attitude of renunciation of absolutization. Hence, it accompanies each discourse and each act with the belief that the will to understand and the will to being understood are inseparable.

Fight every point of view – theoretically, argumentatively, as far as possible – that allows and suffers no other position next to it. Any claim to absolute rights or absolute validity, are fundamentalistic, intolerant and violent already on the theoretical level. Therefore, we want to practice a reflexive-meditative ethics of theoretical and practical non-violence. Thus interculturalism can be both a regulative idea and a corrective for political discourse. Dissent exists, and consensus is to be achieved. It's the consensus that lies on our target course.