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## **DOES INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE NEED RELATIVISM? MORAL RATIONALITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE**

### ***ABSTRACT***

Is a rational approach always able to resolve intercultural conflicts about values and morals? The leading questions of this paper deal with the relationship between cultural difference and moral reasoning, the possibility to argue about cultural differences and the possibility of rational grounds for intercultural dialogue. The underlying idea is that a true intercultural attitude needs a serious theoretical and methodological reflection in order to be aware of the limits of understanding and the pitfalls of universalism. In the first part of the paper I will give a general account of cultural difference and why does it matter from a moral point of view. In the second part I will deal with the issue of rationality, arguing for a pluralistic account of reason. Then I will focus on its relation with cultural differences, outlining some features of moral reasoning as intercultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** identity; culture; relativism; rationality; intercultural dialogue.

*(...) we shouldn't give up on reason too early. We don't need to be so intimidated by distance and incomprehensibility that we take them as sufficient grounds to adopt relativism. There are resources in argument. These have to be tried in each case, because nothing assures us either that relativism is false. We have to try and see.<sup>1</sup>*

What role can reason play when sharp and morally relevant cultural differences are at stake? The answer provided by Charles Taylor in the concluding remarks of his article *Explanation and Practical Reason*, after having consid-

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, C. 1995. "Explanation and Practical Reason." In: *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 55.

ered the cluster of theoretical issues coming from the attempt to use practical reasoning in cases where deep differences between culturally grounded moral perspectives seem to lead to incommensurability, is reported in the quotation above. In Taylor's view, even in presence of the greatest differences we are not allowed to "give up on reason too early," we are at least morally compelled to try and see, to listen and argue and look for shared assumptions until we get a (provisional and tentative) common perspective on the issue. Sticking to his interpretation of moral reasoning, we should always be able to rearticulate our values in a way that make them understandable even to those who do not share them; this will allow a rational argument and, in case of incompatible views, to set the more rational one.<sup>2</sup>

Is it true? Can we conclude that a rational approach is always able to resolve intercultural conflicts about values and morals? The leading question of this paper deals with the relationship between cultural difference and moral reasoning, the possibility to argue about cultural differences and the possibility of rational grounds for intercultural dialogue. The underlying idea is that a true intercultural attitude needs a serious theoretical and methodological reflection in order to be aware of the limits of understanding and the pitfalls of universalism.

Cultural difference does not necessarily mean "conflict," even if sometimes it does; so-called cultural conflicts are too often related to economical and political power, and it would be very difficult to detach the truly cultural level and treat it separately. I attempt here to consider cultural difference and intercultural relations in a very broad and general sense, in order to draw some remarks about the way in which we can deal with them and avoid—or handle more properly—conflicts on the practical, everyday level. My background assumption is that such differences lead to conflict especially if we take for granted some premises about culture and rationality that I will put into question. In the first part of the paper I will give a general account of cultural difference and why does it matter from a moral point of view; in the second part I will deal with the issue of rationality, arguing for a pluralistic account of reason. Then I will focus on its relation with cultural differences, sketching out a possible model for moral reasoning as intercultural dialogue.

## I

Herodotus' remarks about the funeral customs he met in Central Asia are perhaps the first—likely one of the best known—instances of taking into account the problem of culturally based moral differences, at least in the Western tradition. He was impressed by the fact that, whereas Greeks considered burning the best way of honor their dead relatives, people in Central Asia preferred eating them. He realized that there were no reason to consider wrong, irrational or

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<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, 41 ff.

impious each other: they simply acted differently on the basis of different cultural and religious assumptions. A sound different attitude was shown by Cortés when he saw the way Aztecs worshiped their gods: he simply concluded that they did not believe in God but in Satan, and that was, among others, a good reason to exterminate them. The account of Azande's witchcraft and magic provided by Edward Evans-Pritchard shows us a very different way to conceive the whole reality and to understand cause-and-effect relationships: trying to describe and to make sense of those people's practices he first interprets them as incompatible, incommensurable to our scientific view of the world, but ends up considering them irrational or unreasonable as they do not fit a clear and modern view of things. In a similar way, Western secularized people often think of religious conducts as non fully rational behavior; scientific arguments, and very often political ones as well, just consider pointless debating with enchanted people (but also *vice versa*). I am not trying to defend religious or secularist, magic or nonscientific thinking, but I am claiming that whenever we label something or someone as irrational or superstitious we should wonder by what (higher? Objective?) criteria we judge.<sup>3</sup>

What those examples are meant to show is that radical difference exists (not only in ethnography) and it is not always far away from our reality. Further instances of this kind of encounters-clashes of cultures could be found both in literature and in everyday life. It is a quite common experience to consider absurd or irrational a certain cultural habit and then (sometimes), after directly knowing people that use it, come to change our mind and consider it just another way to behave, a way that we may still consider nonviable, but no longer inconceivable. And it remains valid what Peter Winch said about the Azande society (criticizing Evans-Pritchard): "while there may well be room for the use of such critical expressions as 'superstition' or 'irrationality,' the kind of rationality with which such terms might be used to point a contrast remains to be elucidated."<sup>4</sup>

When we are faced with radical difference, concerning justice, dignity, piety, righteousness—one could more generally say humanity—we experience at least *prima facie* a sort of incompatibility. Incompatibility is a stronger category than mere difference. I chose to use this term because the basic question I want to address concerns the possibility of moral reasoning in the absence of a shared ground in terms of value perspectives. How is moral reasoning and arguing possible between incompatible moral perspectives?

Obviously, not every value incompatibility has cultural origins and not every cultural difference turns out to be value incompatibility. Cultural differences are

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<sup>3</sup> As I am suggesting, strong incompatibility is not to be found only in geographical or ethnic distance, but also in different cultures (such as the religious and the secularist one) within the same broader culture.

<sup>4</sup> Winch, P. 1864. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. 1, no. 4 (October), 307–324.

just a case among others in which incompatibility can emerge. Culture is an important dimension of our identity: our language, the meanings and conceptual tools that we use to make sense of reality, have a deep cultural origin. The successive identities that we assume in the course of our existence are also partially made of, or conditioned by, the culture we belong to. Moreover, every cultural perspective is a point of view on reality: all our ideas about the meaning of freedom, dignity, justice, about what is rational and what is not, have a deep cultural origin. Even if, we can enrich and modify those ideas during our lifetime, we can hardly do totally away with this kind of cultural influence. This plainly does not mean that cultural identity is the only relevant feature of human identity: gender, class, professional category, religion, etc. are equally relevant kinds of belonging—whose number is virtually infinite and that can be more or less (or not at all) related to the place of birth. But what is worth noting is that belonging to a tradition, however it is conceived, plays a basic role with regard to the outlook we assume about reality. It can be claimed that the values we espouse and the moral categories that we use cannot be fully understood without taking into account the broader context of meaning that we can generally call “cultural.” Our actions and behaviors, as well as our accounts and evaluation of them, are related to this cultural background that remains mostly unreflected; the encounter with cultural differences offers a chance to call it into question or at least to become aware of it.

Besides those purely theoretical considerations, multicultural contexts are the best starting point to address questions related to cultural differences:<sup>5</sup> the presence of cultural minorities often raises dilemmas (again, not necessarily conflicts) concerning the ways and means in which cultural practices, customs, etc., are to be reproduced within the “guest” majority culture. Such dilemmas can remain limited to the cultural level or touch the political and legal dimension (as debates about the veil, the right to places of cult, etc. in Europe show). In any case, multicultural contexts create contact and interaction among different habits, customs and outlooks—and this usually turns out to be an opportunity and a difficulty at the same time.

Another domain in which intercultural issues typically arise is the more theoretical one of the debate about justice, democracy and human rights. Here we find ideas and categories that, although often considered universal (or universalizable) concepts, have been called into question in the light of their exclusively Western origin or their being not quite fitted in some traditional cultures.<sup>6</sup> But

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<sup>5</sup> I am thinking especially of cultural minorities in a larger community, such as multiethnic neighborhood in an otherwise (or previously) homogeneous urban context (so poliethnic rather than multinational in terms of the distinction introduced by Will Kymlicka in: 1996. *Multicultural Citizenship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>6</sup> I have dealt with this issue and the related debate in: Sghirinzetti, M. 2012. “Democracy and Intercultural Dialogue.” *Skepsis. A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research*, no. XXII/iii, 301–314.

aside from rhetorical claims around the exportability of political theories and practices, it is worth noting that this debate compels us to cast doubts on our most common moral and political insights, detach them from the plain and taken-for-granted dimension in which we usually leave them, wonder about their alleged universality and their cultural origins.

Whether we are personally involved or just engaging a philosophical reflection (and the two experience are not rarely coincident), it happens that we come up against conceptions sharply different from ours, and are led to acknowledge that our usual attitudes and assumptions are unfit—or not fit enough—to face those kind of issues. The attaining awareness of the deep limits of our rational comprehension represents a necessary step towards avoiding the risk of “trans-cultural misunderstanding” and, by this way, towards an attempt to deepen and sharpen our strategies of understanding, to reflect and cast doubts on our interpretive tools.

In the absence of such a critical assessment, we could only have intercultural dialogue without reasoning, or reasoning in the absence of intercultural attitude: that means to run the risk, on the one hand, of unconditioned openness that can lend itself to helpless relativism, and on the other hand of a kind of universalism unable to mind and engage cultural differences. Good intentions are not a good enough defense against that twofold risk. Methodological carefulness is at least a possible way out the alternative. Such an attitude, that we could call “epistemic modesty,” requires a willingness to comprehension in a broader sense than our usual idea of rational understanding. Clifford Geertz summarized it as follows:

“Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his-own indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequent, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, always very imperfectly, to work continuously to keep alive.”<sup>7</sup>

Instances of such methodological carefulness can be found in anthropology as well as in psychology: whereas anthropological reflection has been engaged with cultural differences since its very beginning, psychology had to overcome a certain basic universalism of its grounding ideals in order to “open the door” to culture as one of the fundamental features of human behavior. Starting from the assumption that culture influences the subjects of research as much as the objects, it has been necessary to take into account the scientific approach itself: being aware of the cultural conditioning does not lead to an attempt to neutralize or to get rid of it, but to stress its theoretical significance. An authentic cul-

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<sup>7</sup> Geertz, C. 2000. *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 87.

tural revolution in psychology has been coming along since the 80's when Jerome Bruner, among others, showed the importance of the cultural construction of meaning since the first stages of children cognitive development. This focus on culture makes way for the rise of cultural psychology, a discipline that conceives human psyche as deeply influenced and framed by cultural factors.<sup>8</sup> Given the impossibility of studying “culturally naked human beings,” psychology turns out to be necessarily cultural, and has to take into account the cultural dimension of individual actions and behaviors.<sup>9</sup> Hence the importance of interaction and mutual improvement between psychology and anthropology, in the joint effort to understand minds without detaching them from the individual's concrete common existences, arises.

On this basis, more recently, Françoise Sironi called “theoretical mistreatment” (*maltraitance théorique*) the way in which most clinical psychology deals with pathologies and more generally behaviors related to cultural belonging, and stresses the importance of taking into account the influence of culture on the therapist's approach as well as on people under treatment. Her critical work is especially directed towards the pretended neutrality and objectivity of scientific language and interpretive practices. The denial of the cultural dimension (*deculturation*) has a specific impact on psychological research that runs the risk—both theoretically and practically—of misunderstanding its object. As a therapist working in context of collective violence and abuses, Sironi showed the perils coming from the absence of adequate comprehension of the cultural context by the therapists who risk to produce a particular kind of additional trauma in already traumatized people.<sup>10</sup> Hence the deeply political implications of psychological theory and practices: the way in which cultural difference is conceived (or not conceived; or misconceived) turns out to be a political attitude, strictly related to the particular kind of power that the researcher wields upon his subjects of research (or patients).

Concern about theoretical tools and awareness of their cultural origin are very helpful in philosophical reflection as well. Articulating the strain towards universality balancing with the attention to locality and particularity is perhaps the only way by which the word “universal” does not run the risk to have just an ethnocentric meaning. In the remainder of the paper I aim to attempt to pursue the same kind of ideals in the reflection about cultural difference and moral reasoning. More generally, I think that intercultural attitude in philosophy could

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<sup>8</sup> See Bruner, J. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. See also: Shweder, R. 1991. *Thinking through Cultures Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, especially 73–110.

<sup>9</sup> Bruner, J. 2008. “Culture and Mind: Their Fruitful Incommensurability.” *ETHOS*, vol. 36, Issue 1, 29–45. See also Shweder, R. 1991. *Thinking through Cultures ...*, op. cit., especially 73–110.

<sup>10</sup> Sironi, F. 2007. *Psychopathologie des violences collectives. Essai de Psychologie Géopolitique Clinique*. Paris: Odile Jacob, especially Chapter VII “Pour en finir avec la maltraitance théorique.”

do the same good job that the cultural revolution have been doing in psychology.

## II

Reflecting about the importance of cultural impact on moral reasoning necessarily means also to reflect on the issue of universality-plurality of human reason, and wonder about the limits of a conception of reason which has been worked out within a specific cultural tradition. My argument is not meant to criticize reason as such, or to discredit its effectiveness, but to point out some limits, particularly related to its use in intercultural contexts. A similar claim is stated by Isaiah Berlin in *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, where he provides an inspiring account of how he ended up abandoning a certain idea of reason: he realized that the common idea of (philosophical) reason was deeply related to the ambition of reaching the *Truth*, in an unequivocal, unambiguous, unquestionable way.

“All genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; [...] there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths; [...] the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another.”<sup>11</sup>

The basic idea is that, through (a proper use of) reason, we would be able to work out every kind of contradiction, in the natural sciences as much as in the human domain—at least in principle; this is, in Berlin’s words, the solution of the “cosmic jigsaw puzzle.” This conception leads to the conviction that there is only one way to truth, and although it can be hard to reach it (one can miss the correct direction, get lost or be late ...), nevertheless there is just one right direction to follow. It is clear that in such a conception there is no place for cultural difference, i.e. for different conceptions about the right and the good, conflicting visions of freedom, happiness, etc. Berlin describes as a real intellectual shock the discovery that “not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another. It undermined my early assumption [...] that there could be no conflict between true ends, true answers to the central problems of life.”<sup>12</sup> Disillusion about this kind of rationalism does not necessarily bring to relativism, but compels us to find subtler and more complex way to deal with the issue, if we do not want to dismiss the whole question as pointless or superfluous. Moreover, each form of life has different internal values that need to be understood in their own terms—and

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<sup>11</sup> Berlin, I., 1998. “The Pursuit of the Ideal.” In: *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. Ed. Hardy and Hausheer. London: Pimlico, 1–16, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

understanding does not amount to evaluating. Thus, it is necessary to find a more proper rational approach to moral difference that does not take for granted the resolvability of every cultural disagreement but does not give up the ideal of mutual comprehension and respect.

“... our values are ours, and theirs are theirs. We are free to criticise the values of other cultures to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all.”<sup>13</sup>

Until we stay within the human horizon, we have to strive to understand also what we cannot morally accept, what appears to be miles away from our moral conceptions. In terms of rational understanding, this means that we have to broaden our idea of reason and make it more hospitable towards cultural difference: it is not necessary that all the good and true things turn out to be reconcilable. Again, the struggle against universalism does not amount to give up every critical and rational attitude: this would mean a sort of nihilism. But we have to be extremely careful in using our moral categories to judge and label other culture's practices. For this purpose, we need a powerful enough model of moral reasoning which would allow us to “grasp what we cannot embrace”, in Geertz's words. A corollary of this attitude is to consider cultural differences not mere epiphenomena, but factors that we have to take into account in the rational reflection, without reducing them to a private or idiosyncratic dimension. All this suggests that our idea of rationality can mean something different than the domain of unquestionable and mutually exclusive truths; I am trying to defend a pluralistic ideal of reason, capable to include an attempt of reasoning among differences in a non-reductionist way.

A first step in this direction amounts to detach the ideal of rationality from the one of impartiality: the idea of rationality is in fact commonly identified with a normative stance of neutrality, both cognitively (independence from the observer) and morally (independence from the agent's perspective). This ideal of objectivity has its roots in the natural sciences approach, whose idea of effectiveness amounts to dismiss the first-person outlook;<sup>14</sup> it is just a short step to the ideal of unambiguity mentioned above. Taking into account the first-person perspective does not mean to weaken the ideal of rationality, but just to broaden it; I think we should fear objectivist biases as much as relativism, being aware that only the tension between them can bring us to a properly rational approach.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, “Introduction.” In: Taylor, C. 1985. *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



The same kind of tension has been pointed out by Habermas through his discussion of contextualism and the unity of reason, that is, the faith in a disembodied and context-independent reason versus the disillusionment towards the possibility of overcoming perspectivism. Habermas' approach allows to move from a purely theoretical dimension to a relational, communicative one: we need a "weak but not defeatistic concept of linguistically embodied reason"<sup>15</sup> whose claims of validity have to be context-dependent but at the same time transcend it. Unity and diversity find a possibility of mediation in the intersubjective and linguistic dimension of the human beings; only the concrete and circumstance-related dialogical situation can make room for a shared strain to universality able to overcome the contradiction between "the logical grammar of a single language that describes the world" and a culturally situated reason that "disintegrate kaleidoscopically into a multiplicity of incommensurable embodiments."<sup>16</sup> Far from being a solution, this kind of constitutive tension is what substantiates every communicative situation as a tentative construction of shared reality.

### III

Stressing the concrete and everyday character of the communicative situation is a suitable starting point to outline the intercultural option as a kind of dialogue that do not renounce to critical assessment and judgment, but try to approach the differences through an attitude of interpretative carefulness—or modesty, as I called it earlier—trying to avoid the pitfalls of universalism. By intercultural dialogue I mean in a very broad sense what happens when people from different cultures meet; there can be a real communicative exchange or just attempts to make sense of one another. The prefix "inter-" defines the relational and mobile character of dialogue; it never occurs in an empty or neutral space, but its space arises through the relation among two or more interlocutors. It is a shared and public space, not always equally hospitable and comfortable to all; always in progress and never fully definite.

The implications of this stance are both cognitively and emotionally relevant: it requires the others to allow for speaking without imposing our frameworks of understanding and putting in place the greatest caution in order not to superimpose them on our idea of what should they say. It follows that the requirement of rationality cannot mean using our argumentative model as a critical proof towards the other's perspective; but, on the contrary, that we need a more inclusive argumentative model to set afresh the limits of what we mark as "rational." What we need is a capacity to openness that allows us to rely also on

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<sup>15</sup> Habermas, J. 1992. "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices." In *Postmetaphysical Thinking. Selected Essays*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 115–148, 142.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–5.

what we cannot fully grasp, we need a critical approach and openness to work side by side. This is to say that rationality should become relational, that is, grounded on the experience of the dialogical relation. All this implies that we formulate a revised notion of universalism that is an attempt to attain more and more shared formulations through a process of joint moral reasoning.

The basic difference compared to the previously mentioned kind of universalism is its bottom-up, not top-down inspiration: it does not consist in generalizing asserts from above or exporting values beyond their context of formation, but in exchanging and discussing ideas and perspectives until a partial and provisional agreement is reached. Probably this approach will never lead to a world ethics—which would be just the product of a world culture; its aim is, instead, to construct processes of mutual cooperation and solidarity among the different cultures of humanity. This project would also oppose the integration and assimilation of the minority cultures in an allegedly better and fairer order, in favor of a pluralistic and context-based process.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of these reflections we can retrieve the discussion about relativism: if considered just as a critical attitude, as interpretive carefulness and methodological modesty, it does not lead to nihilism or solipsism but on the contrary to a committed critical stance towards cultures and ethics. Such a stance does not involve further normative assertion except to refrain from improper universalizations based on the generalization of contextually valid values and beliefs. It amounts to a form of awareness of the ethnocentric limits of our style of reasoning; while we cannot attain a general and universal point of view, what we can do is being aware of our interpretive biases, the “basic features of our understanding of human life, those that seem so obvious and fundamental as not to need formulation,” those we cannot help relying on; trying to articulate “the whole context of understanding that we unwittingly carry over unchallenged.”<sup>18</sup> Once we start putting into question this kind of uncontested framework, we do not have to give it up—it would be, if possible, a true form of relativism. We may just become more sensitive to the fact that our criteria are not absolute but as contextual as the other’s. Rather than “relativism” we should therefore call it relativity, that is the awareness of the partiality of every perspective and the impossibility to get a general and “from nowhere” view. Every view can, instead, be broadened and pluralized only through the relation and interaction with other equally partial and contextual perspectives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This ideal of universalism as solidarity is proposed by R. Fernet-Betancourt, in his 2001. *Transformación Intercultural de la Filosofía*, Bilbao.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, C. 2011. “Understanding the Other. A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes.” *Dilemmas and Connections*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 24–38, 28.

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between relativism and relativity has been suggested by Raimon Panikkar within his broader account of pluralism and interculturality. See for instance Panikkar, R., “Religion, Philosophy and Culture.” In: *Polylog* (website <http://them.polylog.org/1/fpr-en.htm>).

The kind of approach I have been supporting is, in my view, among the requirements of an authentic and effective intercultural dialogue: the possibility of a communicative relation that, instead of defending and protecting each other's positions, engage a shared practice with the mutual disposition to listen and learn, and the common aim of mutual understanding. The intercultural stance does not amount to an optimistic or irenic view of reality, nor does it deny that, in some circumstances, there is no room for dialogue. It affirms, however, that pursuing this way and cultivating this kind of awareness we can at least prevent, and sporadically also avoid, dangerous cross-cultural misunderstandings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Genoa. Current research: intercultural dialogue, theoretical and moral issues related to identity and cultural difference. The Ph.D. dissertation title: *Le ragioni degli altri. Per un'etica del dialogo interculturale* [*The Others' Reasons. Towards An Ethics of Intercultural Dialogue*]. Main fields of interest: moral and political philosophy, cultural psychology and anthropology.