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# **The Intercultural Perspective : Ortega Y Gasset, Wallner and Nakatogawa**

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Approaching a culture different from one's own is always a transforming experience to a greater or lesser extent. It is not the same the vital event that occurs as a consequence of the narrations about other cultures than what happens with the activity of tourism or with the experience of having lived in a society culturally different from the one of origin. However, all the experiences that imply that openness, that attitude of listening to the different, that initiatory curiosity towards the mystery of the other, definitely influence the self-understanding of oneself and of one's culture. And this experience, in the words of Prof. Koji Nakatogawa, substantially modifies one's culture.

Often we hear expressions such as "cultural conflicts", "cultural relativism" or "cultural identities". All these terms are understood in a binary sense, in terms of oppositions and fragmentation, because they are based on one of the meanings of the notion of culture : that system of beliefs, values and practices around which a human community is articulated and which enjoys a certain permanence and continuity in time. The fact that many cultures or cultural systems coexist entails the need to manage this multiplicity, for which it is needed to reflect on the cultural event itself and its practical scope.

A theoretical proposal, which has been studied by Nakatogawa and

which has had a relevant influence in the field of intercultural studies, is the one developed by the Viennese professor Friedrich Wallner. Wallner, with his theory of *Constructive Realism* and his method of "strangification", has contributed to rethinking the question of the intercultural perspective. The term interculturality is a relatively recent term that begins to have more and more diffusion with the phenomenon of globalization since the second half of the 20Th Century Today, the intercultural perspective is integrated into multiple dimensions of human praxis, whether in studies, processes, public policies or other similar activities. The attitude and the intercultural perspective possess some centrality when designing any program of action or even in engaging in speculative reflection and probably this fact is motivated by that evident physical or virtual interaction between cultural systems separated both spatially and mentally. Nevertheless, what is ultimately the intercultural perspective and its method is not fully laid out.

We often find some confusion with other notions such as transculturality.

Interculturality has sometimes been understood as the sharing of points of agreement of different cultural systems. Nevertheless, the result of such "sharing" ultimately convinces little to one and others, and convinces little because it leaves the majority indifferent since it does not stem from the original premises that gave birth to the system at issue because this "sharing" does not rest on a narrative, a story, or a belief that supports it. That abstraction of some alleged common traits entails the design of a hybrid system that has a lot of tasteless and little substance. Formally, interculturality, this way formed, is politically correct but has a limited operational function because it is not configured on a basis of true understanding. True understanding involves transformation and can not

leave intact the initial belief system.

The intercultural perspective cannot be defined as an abstraction but as a means of understanding different cultural systems that interact and influence each other.

## **Culture, cultural systems and intercultural view**

Before proceeding to the question of what interculturality is, how it is configured and what practical repercussions it has, it is necessary to clarify a conceptual subtlety in order to situate ourselves in the field that we are addressing.

We have characterized a cultural system as the system of beliefs, values and practices by which a human community is governed and this idea is substantially different from the notion of culture itself.

Culture, in a broad sense, alludes to everything that is the product of thought - thinking understood as an intellectual faculty -, ultimately to everything that exceeds somatic spontaneity and turns into into a system of beliefs and ideas. As Ortega y Gasset argued, it is difficult to deny that thought is a "vital function such as digestion or blood circulation" (Ortega y Gasset, 1981, 99-105). Thought is a biological phenomenon because it has a vital utility: it is necessary for the survival of an individual such as the human being. Ortega contrasted the sphere of spontaneous life with that of spiritual life: even though everything that happens to the human being is itself biological, there are certain vital functions that are immanent and limited to the somatic conditions of the organism, while others - considered transcendent - exceed this scope and acquire a transvital nature. The former would be considered the spontaneous activities and the second the spiritual ones. Thought would be a phenomenon pertaining to

this transvital sphere by which life transcends the merely corporeal condition and is capable of participating in something beyond the organism in which it originates. The position of Ortega conceives of thought as a phenomenon endowed with a double dynamicity: on the one hand, it is a spontaneous product of the living subject thus has its cause and its regime within the organic individual; On the other, it carries within itself the need to be submitted to an objective regime or law "(Ortega y Gasset, 1981, 101). This second dimension is precisely what allows the viability of the human being, since it is the one that enables him to take charge of his environment, to interact with what goes beyond the borders of his own corporality and to adapt to the transorganic conditions in which the living subject carries out his life activity. In this conceptual context, the notion of culture emerges in its precise magnitude as "those vital functions - therefore, subjective, intraorganic facts - that fulfill objective laws that in themselves lead to the condition of conforming to a transvital regime" (Ortega y Gasset, 1981, p. 103). Ortega's argument lies in the context of the search for truth, a truth that he will understand as that all-pervasive and perspectivist instance, but which is ultimately unique since the philosopher presupposes an objective order independent of the living organism to which it adjusts for their survival. Nevertheless, this is not the point that I would like to rescue for the discussion about the configuration of interculturality, -this idea of an objective independent order of the subject would have to be discussed and explained carefully- but rather the idea that it is possible to distinguish between the vital phenomenon of culture, as an organic function constitutive of the biology of the human subject, and cultural systems, as those sets of ideas and practices produced by the activity of these intellectual faculties of organic root.

Another distinction of Orteguian nature, which, equally, deserves to

be considered for the understanding of what, towards the end of this paper, we will characterize as the intercultural perspective, is the difference between ideas and beliefs. Ortega's famous phrase "we have ideas but we are in beliefs" proposes a basic differentiation between what he considers ideas of two classes: as "occurrences" that arise in a subject either in an original way or by inspiration from others and as "beliefs" that provide the subject with the basic, rarely questioned, conceptual substratum on which he builds his life. Both groups - occurrences and beliefs - are ideas properly, that is, products of the intellectual faculty, but their species is different.

Beliefs, in turn, are radical ideas that do not arise spontaneously, nor do we have, but are "ideas that we are" since they shape our world and our being (Ortega y Gasset, 1955, p.11): the world and the "Himself" with which the human being finds himself, appear under the species of an interpretation of "ideas" about the world and about himself" (Ortega y Gasset, 1955, p.10). Ideas-as-occurrences would correspond to those thoughts that occur to the subject about this or the other and those that occur to the fellow and he repeats and adopts. These thoughts may possess the most diverse degrees of truth. They may even be "scientific truths" (Ortega y Gasset, 1955, 10). On ideas-as-occurrences we think and argue, but on these radical beliefs we do not reflect or think about them, they are what we have in order to construct the contents of our thought.

The terminological precisions of Ortega, in my opinion, allow us to advance in the analysis of the interculturality that occupies us and, based on this Orteguian distinction between beliefs and occurrences, extract certain conclusions. If culture comprises both groups of ideas, it may be defined as "the vital system of the ideas of each time". that which enables the human being to take charge of his reality in order to sustain himself

in the world. As we have pointed out, our actual world, due to historical events, is constantly evolving towards greater interdependence and in this sense the term “globalized” should be understood. A world with these characteristics implies greater contact between different cultural systems that currently interact more actively; our present reality must manage this situation to be able to deal with itself and to understand that the vital system of ideas of our time that must be transmitted, in order to be efficient, must adopt an intercultural perspective.

The configuration of the intercultural perspective must stem from a process that is not spontaneous, but involves an attitude and a conscious effort. The intercultural perspective does not consist in the elaboration of a normative system that can serve as an ethical framework for morally judging the practices of different cultures, but rather their vocation is different: to serve as a sympathetic instance. The adoption of the intercultural perspective requires two elements: the attitude of openness and the possibility of transformative self-reflection. Both components are the result of a process that takes place through interaction, by any means but qualitative one, with another cultural system and this will trigger a sequence of successive phases that will be more revolutionary the more different the cultural systems that interact with each other are.

### **The configuration of interculturality by the method of “strangification”**

The justification of the need to adopt the intercultural view to face many of the challenges of our time is made evident by observing the interdependence in which we live on this ship called Earth. The intercultural perspective allows the interaction of the different systems of beliefs

and ideas locally determined in a framework of confluence that is not universal but of understanding, marked by the attitude of openness, and therefore allows to adjust the vital system of ideas and beliefs that we have and in which we are to a global and interdependent world. However, the way in which the intercultural perspective can be articulated requires further elaboration through a conscious attitude and even a methodological effort.

Although the understanding of another culture can occur through interaction through different media, reading, film viewing, tourism or coexistence with people of different nationalities or cultures, among other situations, interculturality, although it is an instance of understanding, has a methodological nature: it is the perspective that is adopted to approach an issue in which different cultural systems intervene. The system of beliefs and ideas of a subject constitute "his culture", which cannot be intercultural, but culturally structured. This cultural system can be modified because cultures are dynamic, but cannot become intercultural because interculturality is an approach of analysis which vocation is to gain understanding facing cultural diversity. In the last part of the article I will return to this question, but in the paragraphs that follow I shall present the *Constructive Realism's* particular method developed by Friedrich Wallner which, in my opinion, provides fundamental elements for the elaboration of the intercultural perspective.

Wallner develops his theoretical proposal to what he calls *Constructive Realism* in order to address one of the recurring issues in the field of Philosophy of Science: the search for Truth. To this end, Wallner starts from the critic to the ways of proceeding in this area since the Circle of Vienna arose and objects that the philosophers that integrated it fell in the same conceptual errors that they tried to avoid. In particular, Wall-

ner points to the fall in metaphysical fictions as a criterion of ultimate justification. A system of thought, whether a scientific paradigm or a cultural system, is understood to be coherent if it has internal consistency. However, as Gödel has proved in the field of mathematics, this system of thinking can only legitimize its consistency outside the system, resorting to an external premise or foundation that, as it proceeds in Science, either comes from another system or rests on a metaphysical fiction ultimately (Wallner, 2016, pos. 210). The system, if it is well conceived, works if the conditions that construct it are given, but one thing is that it works and another very different is that this paradigm may be true, in scientific terms, or universal, in cultural terms.

The initial observation that leads Wallner to transpose his theory and method from the field of philosophy of science to the field of interculturality is precisely the factual observation that science and scientific paradigms have necessarily to deal with the issue of cultural diversity. In principle, any area of human knowledge would encounter similar difficulties since the question of cultural relativism reaches any kind of discipline. Nevertheless, in the case of scientific knowledge this difficulty is made on the one hand more obvious and on the other more shocking. More evident because we find various methods and procedures to “do science” according to culture, and more shocking because in the field of scientific knowledge it seems that what gives it its status of validity is surely its character of certainty, security and objectivity, this is, that the object of knowledge may be capable of verification or falsification. This paradox, which Wallner emphasizes, entails the need to rethink the methods of the field of the philosophy of science in an intercultural context. Similarly, we can use arguments and a similar procedure to validate knowledge in other fields of knowledge such as the case of practical

knowledge.

In the sketch of the problem we find two levels of analysis: on the one hand, the search for the validating external basis; and, on the other hand, the conflict or disagreement when two different paradigms arising from different assumptions and with different rules are brought into contact. How to know which of the two systems is scientifically true or culturally universal?

Wallner's thesis is that we can speak either of scientific systems or cultural systems because both are systems of thought or "microworlds" that constitute one of the levels of Reality on which constructive realism is based (Wallner, 2013, 109- 110; 2016, pos 260-271):

The first level of reality would be constituted by the *Wirklichkeit*, which is not assimilable to the Kantian thing in itself, but it is that biotic reality that nourishes the vital processes and that it is necessary to presuppose although it is not susceptible of demonstration. As nothing substantive of the *wirklichkeit* can be said, the problems of science can not be solved in an absolute way. And above all because science has nothing to do with *wirklichkeit*, but more with another of the dimensions of reality that Wallner calls *Lebenswelt*, which is in continuous evolution and change (Wallner, 2016, pos 264). Therefore, the scientific possibilities on the different aspects that articulate the lebenswelt are unlimited and, therefore, it is structurally impossible to solve all the problems of science. "*Wirklichkeit is just the necessarily presupposed world in which our Lebenswelt (environment) and the manifold Realitäten (realities) produced by different sciences are situated*" (Wallner, 2016, pos 257).

*Lebenswelt*, which Wallner understands to be the second dimension of reality, is "the constructive realist concept for the world in which we are immersed in our ordinary life, the world known to us. Or rather, it is

the totality of the assumptions generally unquestioned and sometimes unknown to ourselves that govern our lives. It is the world we know without thinking about it. It is the way we relate to our environment before even initiating scientific research". We live within the *lebenswelt*, which is the product of culture and always precedes "scientific reality". The *lebenswelt* is already a reality constructed by culture, although it lacks an intentional subject that performs the constructive activity. Within the *lebenswelt*, the sciences find their ideas to investigate, which means that the sciences are always investigating the structure of a construction that has not been realized intentionally unlike the systems of thought that constitute scientific microworlds, which are what conform the third level of reality: the *Realität*. *Realität* is the sum of the scientifically structured aspects of *lebenswelt*. Every science (from any realm) produces *realität*, the set of microworlds that do have constructors: scientists.

In this way, Wallner proposes to eliminate the notion of truth and replace it with that of "scientific validity" because the different scientific systems can be considered equally true based on their presuppositions. Thus, separating the search for truth from certainty, it is possible to purify the scientific knowledge of all metaphysical fiction in its presuppositions: the search for truth transmutes into the legitimation of scientific validity because different systems can be equally functional. For this reason, Wallner's method focuses firstly on understanding and secondly on evaluating to make conscious the inherited and unquestioned metaphysical fictions that operate on the basis of scientific conceptions and paradigms. Therefore, the object of knowledge is no longer focused on the search for absolute truth in every possible world, but what is sought is the scientific validity that is always relative to a concrete scientific system (Wallner 2016, 325-331). Wallner's method for elaborating the under-

standing of this plural reality is the method of “strangification”, which would consist of the technique of intentionally selecting an accepted proposition in a scientific system and moving it to a completely different context. Wallner’s thesis is that the observation of what happens in the interaction reveals all the presuppositions that govern the supposed truth of the original proposition and, therefore, of the original system. “When strange ideas are coming together interesting things happen. It allows us to gauge the limits of our presupposition, our convictions, to glimpse the silent beliefs that run in the background” (Wallner, 2016, pos. 291). In this way, Wallner introduces hermeneutics in the field of the philosophy of science (Wallner, 2016, pos. 278, 284). Wallner subtly notes that the method can also be used and functions correctly in the intercultural context (Wallner, 2016, pos. 291): “If you strangify ideas from Western ontology by probing them in the context of Chinese classical ontology, you will become very confused because nothing seems to fit”. The theory of constructive realism through the method of strangification aims to understand the system of thought from within, it does not consist of composing a normative system that can be used as a model to examine whether different systems of thought meet certain conditions, but Wallner’s proposal is to find the elements that are presupposed and not questioned within each system of thought. The method of strangification would comprise three phases: 1) A phase of chaos and confusion; 2) The bafflement and alienation properly; 3) A questioning of the sustained and non meditated pressupositions that shows the blind assumptions. The method of strangification what brings to light are those shocking structures that have a double aspect: on the one hand, they create confusion and, therefore, prevent any initial understanding and, on the other, question their own presuppositions of understanding triggering an imaginative mechanism of un-

derstanding itself. This further process allows the intercultural perspective to be configured as an understanding and non-normative instance.

## **Interculturality as transformative understanding**

In principle, the “strangification” methodology has the objective of articulating the thesis that Constructive Realism holds in order to purify the philosophy of science from the metaphysical fictions on which it is based, however, as Nakatogawa notes, the method of strangification itself produces substantial modifications in the same systems of thought that examines and hardly the scientific validity that it pretends to justify remains unchanged.

Nakatogawa argues that when a propositional system called  $a_1$ , belonging to a larger system named A that encompasses it, is transposed into a system B and  $a_1$  is altered because of that, when the system  $a_1$  returns to its original system A, it substantially modifies the whole system A, and therefore all other systems,  $a_2$ ,  $a_3$ ,  $a_4$ ..., contained in A. In my opinion, the same would occur in system B in which  $a_1$  has interacted with its subsystems  $b_1$ ,  $b_2$ ,  $b_3$ ... The method of strangification is laid out precisely as a creative process stemming from the deepening of the understanding of systems, which are marked by an internal dynamism, and this is what makes the research advance. Once the initial premise has been questioned and the diversity of one’s own and others’ assumptions has been understood, there is no going back: the original systems are modified and the initial presuppositions of all the systems that come into contact are changed and, in turn, a new instance occurs that is not the sum of them.

This circumstance, extended to the sphere of interculturality, offers interesting possibilities of shaping the intercultural perspective.

Vincent Shen has worked on the concept of “strangification” emphasizing the intercultural perspective. According to Shen human life is an incessant process of self-extension through two issues: the situations of bafflement to which we are driven by the nature of the passing of life itself and also by self-consciousness through reflection. Shen conceives this process of “strangification” (*waitui*) as “the act by which one goes outside of oneself from to the many others, from familiarity to otherness” (Shen, 2016, pos. 382). In this sense, Chinese philosophy always recognizes that self-reflection without strangification results in solipsism, in the shadow of self-eclosure, while strangification without self-awareness results in self-alienation (Shen, 2016, pos. 389). In Chinese philosophy this process of *waitui* is the most crucial of human existence, but it needs self in order of not to be lost not to be lost and dissolved in the multiplicity; this duality of the process (estrangification and self-reflection) is underlined by Confucianism: someone who extends his generosity (Openness) can bring peace to the four seas. Mencius observed that “A human being who can fully unfold his own heart would know well his own self-nature. He who knows well his own self-nature will be able to understand Heaven” (Shen, 2016, pos. 395-402)

Human existence, which is ultimately a process of construction of a significant world, is articulated around this dialectical process with no end between strangification and self-reflection; between the other and the self.

According to Shen, there is a dynamic energy in the search for meaning as a human desire that transcends any particular form of realization; It is a search for transcendence from the immanence of the energy of the incarnated body (Shen, 2016, pos. 416). Our need for the configuration of forms of representation reflects our need for the search for meaning and

is articulated precisely in those sophisticated forms of representation that are cultural, scientific or spiritual systems.

The thesis presented by the authors, which have been outlined in this article, inscribed in different cultural traditions allow us to analyze the question of the universal-particular dialectic from another point of view. Interculturality would not consist in the justification of the foundations of a universal normative system nor in the coexistence of multiple relative systems, but would be configured as a dialectical process between the different particular systems that influence each other and generate a new one that surpasses the previous in the degree of understanding of one's existence (Shen, 2016, pos. 409)

Interculturality is not a finished, independent or normative instance - as Panikkar (2006) points out- it is something that is in the midst of cultures and is about to be done. Interculturality is situated in the gap, in the abyss between cultural systems. It does not belong to a system that has already been transformed, but is placed in the previous moment in which understanding takes place, but the original culture has not yet been modified. Interculturality is therefore temporary but permanently unfinished and limited in terms of its function - to serve as understanding view- although infinite in its structure because it is always potential. One can not speak of intercultural culture, although culture can update its premises in the light of the intercultural perspective. Interculturality comes from that understanding attitude that questions beliefs and values through interaction with other systems of ideas and beliefs. Interculturality should not have a normative aim, but its vocation is one's own and others' understanding.

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