

A major challenge for intercultural philosophy: '9/11' and its aftermath

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The sudden and massive violence brought to various locations on the eastern seaboard of the North American continent on 11 September 2001 of the Common Era has had a profound impact on public opinion throughout the North Atlantic region, and far beyond. It soon managed to mobilise some of the finest minds in philosophy, including Derrida, Habermas, Kearney etc. Beyond its political and military topicality, the events bring out some of the major contradictions in the world today. It is a major task of philosophy to conceptualise and interpret contemporary experiences in terms (concepts and theories) that are, at the same time, original, recognisable, revealing, intersubjective, and capable of generalisation; and in the process to take a critical distance from the terms that circulate in the wider society as a result of pre-philosophical attempts (usually from a particularist and interested position) to interpret the same experience. Hence my reluctance to speak, in this philosophical connexion, of '9/11' and of 'terrorism'.

Intercultural philosophy is the branch of philosophy that was explicitly established, in the last few decades, in order to address the *globalisation of difference*, and it is in this specific field that the dramatic recent events represent the greatest challenges at profound and systematic interpretation. My argument will review some of these challenges, and propose very tentative answers within the framework of my own emerging approach to intercultural philosophy:

- *Hermeneutics* has been a standard intercultural approach; what is its potential, and what its limitations, if brought to bear upon the global contradictions under consideration here?
- Typical of the conflict is the emergence, as a result of recent socio-political processes, of two separate and opposing domains, both with unique claims to knowledge and truth; this poses fundamental *epistemological* problems: is all knowledge, all truth, by necessity confined to one cultural domain? or, alternatively, what is the possibility of an *intercultural epistemology*?
- There is no dearth of local, particularist ethical repertoires on the basis of which the sudden and massive violence in question may be unequivocally condemned, brought to justice, retributed, even revenged; is the appeal to 'universal' human rights one such local repertoire, or are its universalist claims rather valid? is all ethics necessarily confined to one cultural domain? or is it (in the face of obvious necessity) possible to develop an *intercultural ethics*?
- Although both opposing domains in the conflict claim immutable identity positions (often – cf. Huntington – described in terms of cultures and world religions), the last few decades of empirical research and philosophical reflection on identity have taught us to appreciate the *performative and strategic dimensions* of such claims, within an overall framework set by globalisation and by the recognition politics of the recently emerged and highly ideological 'multicultural society'; does this allow us a meta-analysis of the conflict in other than cultural and religious terms? does it suggest a way-out of the conflict?
- Illuminating as the insight in identity's strategic performativity may be, it has, *on both sides*, a firm limitation in *the historicity of identity formation through violence*; this, in its turn, may also suggest a way out, but along rather different lines.

Inter-'cultural' philosophy turns out to be, not so much the investigation of the effects of cultural difference (where the cultural difference in itself is taken for granted as a factor *sui generis*). It is primarily a critical yet sympathetic reflection on the global construction and deconstruction of difference, in the attempt to explore the conditions for communication, negotiation, and reconciliation on the basis of a shared humanity. In discharge of the special responsibilities of intellectuals, it is here that resides the 'prophetic responsibility' of this branch of philosophy – and I meant this in the original sense of 'speaking on behalf of' – not of God, but of the ills of global society today, and especially of those suffering most as a result of these ills. There is little to suggest that the latter characterisation applies, in the first place, to inhabitants of the North Atlantic region, either today, or at any time in the last few centuries.

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