

## My Way to Intercultural Philosophy

*Mi camino a la filosofía intercultural*

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### Resumen

El recorrido de mi pensamiento filosófico me guió, desde la hermenéutica, a través de la dialéctica y las filosofías de la diferencia, hasta la filosofía intercultural con especial atención en la filosofía africana. Estudié hermenéutica con los teólogos Gerhard Ebeling y Erns Fuchs en Tübingen, con Philipp Vielhauer en Bonn y con el filósofo Hans-Georg Gadamer en Heidelberg durante los años 50. A través de la lectura de Hegel y Marx llegué a aceptar la posición de la dialéctica materialista. Mi autor preferido era Ernst Bloch, quien combina su dialéctica materialista con una interpretación crítica de la religión, especialmente la judeo-cristiana. La deconstrucción de Jacques Derrida de la dialéctica hegeliana me condujo a las filosofías de la diferencia. El concepto del Otro en estas filosofías me llevó a contribuir en el surgimiento y desarrollo de la filosofía intercultural.

Palabras clave: hermenéutica, dialéctica, filosofías de la diferencia, filosofía intercultural, filosofía africana.

### Abstract

My way of philosophical thought led me from hermeneutics, via dialectics and philosophies of difference to intercultural philosophy with special attention for African philosophy. I studied hermeneutics with the theologians Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs at Tübingen, Philipp Vielhauer at Bonn and the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer at Heidelberg in the 1950ies. Reading Hegel and Marx I came to accept the position of materialist dialectics. My favorite author was Ernst Bloch who combines his position of materialist dialectics with a critical interpretation of religion, especially Jewish-Christian religion. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Hegelian dialectics brought me to the philosophies of difference. The concept of the Other in these philosophies formed the entrance to contribute to the foundation and the development of intercultural philosophy.

Keywords: hermeneutics, dialectics, philosophies of difference, intercultural philosophy, african philosophy.

For Aristotle –as we all know– astonishment was the beginning of philosophy. Astonishment made him ask certain questions. Why are human beings and the things in the world what they are and how they are? Why are they at all? What seems to be self-evident becomes a problem as soon as one wants to know the reasons for it. For Aristotle thus arose the quest for the being of man and of the things in the world. And he departed from the conviction that there are universal answers for his questions. In this sense ontology, the theory of being, became the fundamental discipline of Greek and in the course of history of European-western philosophy. Insofar as this quest for being was asked in the most general sense, this philosophy has also a theological dimension. With a term of Heidegger it is called onto-theo-logy.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Descartes with his methodical doubt and his search for a *fundamentum inconcussum* of thought has found a new beginning within European-western philosophy. For the answer to the question why are the human beings and the things in the world what they are and how they are, he has introduced specific methodical conditions, which were centred in the subjective thinking of the philosopher.

In my own intellectual development it was another why-question than the very general one of Aristotle, which brought me to philosophy. Of course, I had to ask it within the framework of Descartes' methodical self-ascertainment. I will describe here this specific why-question and the way which has come forth from its pursuit only by giving the crucial catchwords. A more detailed representation has been given by Henk Oosterling in his introduction to the book which he had edited together with Frans de Jong in honour of my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday (Oosterling and De Jong, 1990: XI-XXII). Oosterling underlines correctly that the development of my thought in fact was not marked by ruptures but rather by shiftings. Earlier positions were not abandoned, but every time seen under new perspectives.

Within the general context of philosophy, which was founded by ontology, I departed from a more specific and subordinate question. Why should I or why can I take over and accept for me as valid the beliefs of Christian theology in their protestant version, which are based on the texts of the Bible? These texts are about 2000 years old or older and presuppose another way of thought and of life, another understanding of the world and of man. How can the contents of these texts be proved relevant for present times and the present way of thought? It is easily to understand that these questions would direct my interest to hermeneutics or the theory of understanding.

In the 1950ies as a young student I joined the theological representatives of hermeneutics Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs at the University of Tübingen and later Philipp Vielhauer at the University of Bonn. They had worked out, everyone in his own way, the hermeneutic position of Rudolf Bultmann. This position can be described by the twofold formula: «Demythologisation of the New Testament» or «Existential Interpretation of the Biblical message» (Bultmann, 1952: 211-235). The longer the more it seemed necessary to me to think through the hermeneutic problem in a more principle way. So I went to the University of Heidelberg to study with Hans-Georg Gadamer who based his hermeneutic theory on the existential-ontological analysis of the human being by Martin Heidegger.

The specific being of human existence according to Heidegger means that it can understand herself in her way of being, which is different from the way of being of the things in the world. Departing from this position, Gadamer has put the hermeneutic question in a broad and general way on the philosophical agenda, especially with regard to the historical human sciences and therefore also to theology. In doing so he has discussed the question of understanding texts from early historical periods within the horizon of ontology. The being of human existence is not only determined by the fact that she, understanding herself and the world, has language, what one can read already with Aristotle, but also that she is – with a formulation of Friedrich Hölderlin – «a conversation» (*ein Gespräch*). The human being is what she is, insofar as she is in a conversation with others from earlier times or from her own time (Gadamer, 1961: 162-360, 445-449). In my own work, under supervision of Gadamer, I have turned to Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher who was a theologian and a philosopher himself and who had worked out a general theory of hermeneutics for the first time, which he applied in a second step on the New Testament and the Biblical texts (Schleiermacher, 1974: 31, 75, 89-91, 93-94, 109-110).

In the course of time I found the perspective of a *history of ideas* with the theological representatives of hermeneutics and also with Gadamer no longer satisfactory. I felt that I needed to orientate myself philosophically in the political and societal situation of the time after World War II and the new developments of the late 1950ies and the beginning 1960ies. The world was divided into two parts: a western capitalistic and an eastern socialist system. In this situation the philosophical conceptions of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and of Karl Marx have got a decisive meaning for me. My way led me from hermeneutics to dialectics.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch, who had been born in Ludwigshafen, being descended from a Jewish family, had not only critically thought through Hegel, Marx and the Marxist

philosophy from the presuppositions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also taken into account the teachings of the Jewish-Christian religion. The Biblical message of the Kingdom of God meant in his philosophy that it was the utopia of a better world which was anchored in the deepest layer of human consciousness and which had to be realised in the framework of historical future (Bloch, 1959: 334-368, 1392-1550). Bloch's way of thought showed me the direction for my further philosophical work.

In the history after the events of the year 1968, when students from France, the Federal Republic of Germany, the United States of America and from other countries had tried to realise the Marxist-socialist utopia, it became clear that they were confronted with an insurmountable resistance of the existing political and societal system. A deeper and broader way of thought proved to be necessary in order to understand these historical experiences. So I came to the conviction that the means of thought and the directions of thought of the European-western philosophical tradition were too narrow, because everything was thought of as being in an opposition: East and West, capitalism and socialism, freedom and oppression.

Philosophically this narrowness meant to me that by the dialectical way of thought every difference *in a deeper understanding* was conceptualised as an opposition. By the thesis of Marx (1953: 945): Dialectics «is only right if it knows its borders». I felt challenged to undertake a frontier-traffic of dialectical thought. I gave myself the double task to do research after the dialectics of the border and the border of dialectics (Kimmerle, 1983: 127-141).

By the philosophies of difference, which have developed a more radical *concept of the Other* than in the European-western tradition can be found, I was able to grasp the limits of this tradition. Emmanuel Levinas tries to overcome the ontologically founded philosophy by an ethically inspired way of thought. In doing so his roots in the tradition of Jewish thought plays an important role. Not what the human being is, but that she is unconditionally called on by the face of the Other as a fellow human being, the more so if this is a foreigner, forms the most fundamental philosophical question for Levinas (1968: 168-179).

The most direct support for my own problem I found in Jacques Derrida's conception of a philosophy of difference, especially in his contributions to a deconstruction of Hegelian dialectics. He endeavours to radicalise the thought of Heidegger, which stays within the framework of ontology by ultimately referring to the difference of Being and beings. Derrida's thought of *différance* departs from the emergence of new differences all the time as a «not-original origin». In this way he does not want to replace the ontological foundation by

an ethical one like Levinas, but to undermine foundational thought as such (Derrida, 1972: 1-29).

Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have worked with the philosophies of difference in the concrete area of gender research and hereby they have extended the general possibilities of this way of thought. The difference of the sexes forms a concrete otherness which cannot be reduced to the other of the same. Womanliness is not defined by her opposition to manliness, but by her own manifold characteristics. By overcoming the conception of two opposite sexes, they want to show a general alternative to the thinking of oppositions as the basic form of thought in the European-western philosophy. Especially Irigaray (1977) has concentrated on this aspect. Both of them do not intend to make women alike to men, but to express by the own characteristics of womanliness something which has been forgotten and covered in the European-western tradition of philosophy. This type of concretisation and extension of the philosophies of difference is according to me further reaching than the examples of a *politics of difference*, which can be found with other philosophers of difference and which are self-evidently of great importance too.

Kristeva had emigrated during the time of the Cold War from Bulgaria to France and came to know the situation of a foreigner who lives in a different culture from her personal experience. She has analysed and described in a wonderful literary style the paradoxical situation of people, who live in a culture which is not their own one by birth and by education, as an existence between oppression and superiority. When she finally comes to the conclusion: *Foreigners are we to ourselves* she always gives the same reason for being a foreigner. That reason is the *unconscious* in the sense of the Freudian psychoanalysis, which is foreign to our everyday consciousness (Kristeva, 1990: 11-49, 199-202). One can criticise this last passage of her book. For me it is important that she, from the presuppositions of the philosophies of difference, has entered the path to a discussion of the problems which are paramount in the world of today where different cultures are confronted and mixed up on the biggest scale ever.

In my philosophical work the acquaintance with the philosophies of difference became the starting point for my contribution to explain the problems of multiculturalism and of interculturality (Kimmerle, 2000: 196-222). I decided to turn to the other and the foreigner in the most radical sense of the word. My specific contribution to intercultural philosophy is the study of the philosophies of a non-western culture in which traditionally people mainly communicated and handed down their knowledge to later generations *in an oral way*. I have

chosen for this the philosophies of sub-Saharan Africa. Making this my task proved to be fascinating and satisfying, but not always easy and comfortable.

The practice of comparative philosophy which existed since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, comparing especially philosophies of the West and the Far East has according to my opinion methodical and geographical limits. It is not apt just *to compare* philosophies with each other. It cannot be avoided that they influence each other and that dialogues between them come up. And there is no valid justification to restrict the comparison, what this type of philosophy does, to cultures which have a «written history» (Libbrecht, 1995: 16).

During the Middle Ages intercultural exchanges of ideas played an important role in European philosophy. There were specific contributions of Islamic philosophers to questions which were discussed in Europe. In his *History of Western Philosophy* Bertrand Russell (1979, 413-421) has paid rather extensive attention to the meaning of Islamic thought to the philosophy of the Middle Ages. Bloch has characterised the way of thought in the works of Avicenna and Averrhoes in the context of these discussions as a *Left-wing Aristotelism* (Bloch, 1952: 8-59). We owe to him in a more general philosophical sense a criticism of the European-western claim to be the only valid representation of philosophy in the world, which cannot be justified in what sense so ever, when he speaks of a *Multiversum of cultures* and asks for a *many-voiced* communication between different cultures (Bloch, 1963: 170-176).

After the end of colonialism in the sense of the political control of non-European countries and parts of the world by European states, philosophers of Middle and South America and also of the native population of North America, and even of the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa and of Oceania raise their voices. This broad range of different philosophies all over the world is impressively documented in the 10 volumes of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998), in which not only Indian, Chinese, Arabic and Jewish philosophies have their place as non-Western philosophies, but also African and Latin American philosophies. In Germany and some other European countries, philosophers do not take part in this development, because they stick to traditional standards for philosophical quality. Thus, they do not succeed to really overcome a Eurocentric way of thought.

My above mentioned decision in the process of founding and working out intercultural philosophy to concentrate on sub-Saharan African philosophy and to engage in dialogues with philosophers from this area of the world, is motivated by the conviction that this new type of philosophy only is realised in an adequate manner, if it is acknowledged that also peoples which communicate primarily in an oral way have philosophy. Together with some



colleagues from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Austria, I have led dialogues with African philosophers from many different regions of this continent about subjects which were found of common interest. Most of these dialogues on justice and truth, time and development, communalism and democracy, aesthetics and morality, spirituality and experience of death are published in different journals and before all in the series *Studies Intercultural Philosophy* which is published by Rodopi Editions in Amsterdam. Dialogues in general, presuppose among other things equality in rank and diversity in contents with regard to the partners, and complete openness with regard to the expected results. Partners in dialogues do not only tolerate each other, they meet each other with respect and reverence.

The acknowledgement and high estimation of art from sub-Saharan Africa and from Oceania by European and western artists and organisers of art-exhibitions form according to my opinion the role of an outrider regarding the cooperation on equal level between western and non-western partners. It started with the Japonism of Van Gogh and some of his contemporaries, and with the turn of Gauguin to the Oceanic culture. The high estimation of African art, especially masks, by Picasso and Braque was pioneering in this field. Today there are different forms of cooperation between western and non-western artists, in which members of the Cobra-group and disciples of Joseph Beuys participate. In 1984 and 1989 in New York and in Paris western organisers of exhibitions have chosen for an intercultural perspective in their common presentation of art from western and non-western countries. And in 2002 a Nigerian curator who lives in New York was given the task to organise the *Dokumenta* in Kassel, where every five years the development of visual art all over the world is represented.

This type of interculturality, as it is practised in art and as philosophers try to introduce it, will also have consequences for the way, in which politicians and business people coming from western and non-western cultures meet each other. The intercultural philosophical dialogues can have the effect that also the intercultural communication in the fields of politics and economy will become *more dialogical*. Moreover in this way also the situation in multicultural societies can be ameliorated by offering people in these societies not only the perspective that their cultural life gets enriched, but also that therein lie the germs for new and fruitful cultural, political and societal constellations.

There is no doubt that also in the future heavy oppositions will come up in the world. But it is important that the mutual argumentations are not only fed by an oppositional logic. Otherwise in the field of cultural communication and its radiation to the areas of politics and

economy one will fall behind after what has been achieved by introducing an intercultural dimension in art and philosophy.

In a final analysis intercultural philosophy proves not only to be a secondary and subordinate discipline in the context of an ontologically founded philosophy. This new type of philosophy does not ask in the manner of European-western philosophy since Aristotle what and how human beings and the things in the world are, especially not in the sense that this question can be answered in a universal way which is valid everywhere and at any time. In the multiversum of cultures a multiperspectivism of truth exists, not only with regard to the question of being, what and how human beings and the things in the world are, but also with regard to the ultimate question of meaningfulness why something exists at all and there is not nothing, including the religious implications of that question.

The world-religions themselves, especially Christianity and other monotheistic religions, of which everyone paradoxically claims to possess the absolute truth, are only in the third instance, after art and philosophy, on the way to an intercultural way of thought. Although there is often said that ‘interreligious dialogues’ are going on, one can only speak of dialogues in the full sense of the word, when the partners have given up any claim of possessing the absolute truth.

After about two decades, in which my philosophical work has been concentrated on dialogues with African philosophies and philosophers, this kind of work has moved into the background. Since about 2006 I am trying to clarify for myself what the results of these dialogues are. I have given this work the title *Returning home*, which can easily be misunderstood. In three little volumes of the *Interkulturelle Bibliothek* (6, 48 and 58), I have tried to give an interpretation of this title by which the misunderstanding is avoided (Kimmerle, 2006, 2007, 2008). I have worked out what it means that within my way of thought an intercultural dimension is established. Thereby I have taken a step in the direction of a cosmopolitan philosophical position, like Derrida, a Berber from Northern Africa who lived in France, had done, and also Kwame Anthony Appiah who has been born in Ghana and who is living and teaching in the United States of America.

I am aware of the fact that also for my intellectual biography is presupposed that my personal life has taken place between different cultures. Already the family in which I have been born was characterised by the tension between a father from Württemberg in Southern Germany and a mother from an area near Cologne in the North-Western region of this country. Since 1976 I am living as a German citizen in the Netherlands, and from 1988 until



2006 I have been staying yearly for longer or shorter periods as a European in sub-Saharan Africa.

The history of my life has led me from a strongly Christian youth to getting rid of this belief in connection with a strictly philosophical way of thought, especially of reflecting religious problems. Later I was highly astonished about the vivid spirituality of African people. The world of spirits forms directly part of their life. Although this kind of belief cannot simply be taken over under the conditions of European-western thought, it motivated me to the thesis that reason and belief are of the same origin and of equal right. Thus I want to extend the Aristotelian definition of the human being: it has not just reason, but in the same way also belief. In a more complete intellectual autobiography this is documented in detail as a work in progress on my website [www.kimmerle.nl](http://www.kimmerle.nl). I could use the history of my life as an argument to defend this thesis.

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