

**Review of *Die Interkulturalitätsdebatte: Leit- und Streitbegriffe / Intercultural Discourse: Key and Contested Concepts*, edited by Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Gita Dharampal-Frick and Minou Friele**

**Frieberg: Karl Alber Verlag, 2012, ISBN: 979-3495485415, pb, 363pp.**

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Published online: 29 August 2013

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Despite the steady growth and deepening of cross-cultural philosophy in the past several decades, one of the most conspicuous lacunae in both research and instruction in the field is the lack of concentration on systematic methodological approaches and considerations. While examinations of individual thinkers in either Asian or Western traditions may lead studies of them to some important insights into the precedents that may have been set for cross-cultural hermeneutics, the numbers of broad-ranging methodological approaches to ‘comparative’ thought are sparse indeed. The collection of essays *Die Interkulturalitätsdebatte: Leit- und Streitbegriffe/Intercultural Discourse: Key and Contested Concepts* edited by Kirloskar-Steinbach, Dharampal-Frick and Friele admirably attempts to address this problem. Bringing together the insights of multiple disciplines, philosophy, sociology, psychology, cultural studies and political science, the volume highlights the sometimes conflicting but often complementary perspectives that can, when all taken properly into account, help light the way both backwards and forwards in the ventures of cross-cultural dialogue.

The collection of German and English essays, from a remarkably diverse group of scholars, is divided roughly equally into six sections. The first is largely concerned with philosophical hermeneutics. Two sections follow on ‘intercultural self-understanding,’ respectively from the personal, individual and ‘collective’ perspectives. Next are two sections focusing on the ‘public sphere,’ which take into account social, political and economic dimensions of cross-cultural encounter. The volume concludes with a section featuring a number of contemporary political debates about multicultural and global issues. There are 38 essays in total in the collection, averaging six to eight pages in length apiece. This structure gives the volume the character of a kind of methodological

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‘handbook,’ with each entry providing either valuable lessons or a speculative roadmap for comprehending cross-cultural dialogue given the represented disciplinary concerns. I will in what follows briefly discuss one or two essays from five of the six sections, which will hopefully serve as an invitation for prospective readers to explore the collection itself in greater depth.

A fascinating conversation is emphasized in the very first section between two different views of what cross-cultural philosophy is all about. The first, by Ram Adhar Mall, entitled ‘*Zur Hermeneutik Interkultureller Philosophie*,’ makes the case that philosophical traditions can no longer be viably insular and insist on the normativity of their own conceptual frameworks, but instead must philosophize interculturally. Through the employment of what he calls ‘analogical hermeneutics,’ the intercultural philosopher does not rest easily on either of the views that the various conceptual frameworks among different traditions are either totally commensurable or incommensurable, but instead are manifestations of ‘fundamentally different philosophical possibilities’ (p. 40).<sup>1</sup> These different possibilities can be comprehended by participants in intercultural philosophy not because of some presupposed universal categories of thought and essential structures of reflection, but because ‘understanding’ has the ‘capacity of self-restraint’ and the ability to comprehend ‘what it has not yet constituted’ (pp. 40–41). The ‘subject’ is, in thought and practice, at once ‘located’ (*orthaft*) in its own tradition as well as potentially ‘without any locale’ (*ortlos*), in the sense that, from the ‘native, mundane’ perspective, one is unable to see their own standpoint as one among many, but from a ‘higher view’ can see one’s view as merely one’s own, which in turn can dispose the subject toward ‘openness and tolerance’ (p. 41). Thought philosophy is ‘undoubtedly’ universal, we must comprehend the relation of philosophical traditions to one another along the lines of Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblances,’ Habermass’ ‘constitutive conditions for the possibility of communication’ or the realm of what Rawls referred to as ‘overlapping consensus’ (pp. 42–43).

By contrast, in the following essay, ‘*Differenz: Unterschiedungen, Differenzierungen, Dimensionen*,’ Georg Stenger argues that whatever we have heretofore assumed were the possibilities of philosophical understanding, even when we would extend these possibilities to intercultural dimensions, these assumptions do not in fact have ‘empirical’ foundations, but themselves arise from the background of ‘political and social relations of power and sometimes violence’ (p. 46). A more responsible approach to thinking about principles of intercultural engagement would recognize that their ‘emphasis lies in the linguistic anchorage of cultural forms of thought,’ while at the same time being aware that these very linguistic contours of culture themselves ‘arise from the background of a poly-perspectivism that operates in a multilingual fashion, and so can be seen to provide an opening for a concomitant hybridity of trans-cultural philosophical understanding’ (p. 47). On the basis of these points, Stenger formulates a number of principles of intercultural discourse, that last of which is of particular import. We must make the ‘paradigm of difference’ into a ‘genuine field of research,’ beyond the polarized ways in which sameness and otherness, one’s own and the other, have been classically understood (p. 48). Taking the last point seriously would lead us to engage with varying conceptions of what hermeneutics and philosophy are and entail, such as Heinz Kimmerle’s ‘hermeneutics of listening’ and his pointing toward African traditions as ones of ‘wisdom,’ and

<sup>1</sup> All quoted translations of from the German essays in this review are my own.

Ryosuke Ohashi's fundamentally aesthetic conception of philosophy (p. 51). We are not dealing overlapping perspectives in one world, but with a 'plurality of worlds' in which hybridity, precisely because it is an irreducible element of language, thought, understanding and practice, can expand our possibilities of dialogue.

In the first section on cultural self-understanding from a personal dimension, Asha Varadhavajan reviews a plethora of classical and modern conceptions of subjectivity. From Foucault's and Wolfe's ruminations on the technologically and self-confessional conformity of the contemporary person to the poles of mind-body philosophical debate exhibited from Descartes to Merleau-Ponty and the neuroscientists, from the social analysis of selves as products of power-relations and ideology in Athusser and Lacan to Freud's and Rose's examinations of the sexual complexes and constructed genders of selves, all the way to the differing selves of Fanon and Spivak, one sees the broad-ranging and incredibly contested range of senses of subjectivity in recent centuries. These fractures in reflection, Varadhavajan insightfully points out, emerge whether one is considering the restricted notion of 'subjectivity' or ideas that are 'readily conflatable' with it, such as those of 'self,' 'person' and 'ego' (p. 112).

In the following section on cultural self-understanding on the 'collective' level, Tariq Modood, in his contribution 'Essentialism and its Critiques,' examines the role and viability of notions of 'essence' in traditions. He cautions against the over-theorization of ordinary cultural discourse about essences or general features of cultures, and he does so for a number of reasons. First, if we insist on a principle opposing essentialism that defines such opposition as 'anti-reification,' then we risk multiculturalism itself becoming a target, as it often relies on concepts such as 'ethnicity' that involve, not just in theoretical but practical discourse, some level of reification (p. 166). Second, though there is no need in everyday language to resort to formal notions of fixed essences in culture, identity 'cannot merely be flux and fluidity,' but assumes that change is happening to something that is continuous in some distinctly identifiable sense (p. 167). Drawing upon Wittgenstein's notion of the 'language game,' Modood claims that a theoretical hypervigilance about essentialist language often wrongly faults discourse about culture for philosophical errors when in fact the common expressions we use to express features and values of cultures are not theoretical in nature to begin with, and therefore multicultural talk can proceed fruitfully.

In the opening section on the 'Public Sphere' dealing with the social dimensions of culture, Joseph Prabhu provides a most helpful overview of changing conceptions of modernity over the last several centuries, conceptions that originated in Europe but have undergone important revisions in the contemporary global context. The West's military, political and economic expansion was accompanied by what Prabhu refers to as a philosophical self-confidence in progress and rationality, and a cultural sense of superiority and individualistic secularism that went with them. The literary and nationalist voices that opposed Western Enlightenment modernity, such as those of Tolstoy, Gandhi and Ruskin, have been followed by anti-colonialist criticism, most notably in the works of Enrique Dussel, who begins to re-envision modernity in global terms, pointing out that the European form of modernity was only the first kind, which will see responses from South and East Asia in the present and near future. Prabhu concludes by articulating the fact that 'all societies modernize,' and as they do, they subject themselves to various forms of 'self-critique' that enable them to orient themselves to their changing circumstances. Therefore, seeing modernity in the global sense as more closely tied to

such self-critique and ‘renewal’ may be more appropriate to how it is being played out in ongoing traditions (p. 225).

In the following section on the ‘Public Sphere’ dealing with politics and economics, Matthias Kettner, in his essay ‘*Globalisierung*,’ attempts to thematize the globalization process as one in which formerly local shapes of rationality and activity are lifted out of their local contexts and into ‘trans-local’ ones (p. 289). We see examples of such a process at work in everything from the integration of currencies to tourism to the dialogue of conceptions of human rights and the good life to normative claims about how to achieve true ‘equality’ in the political order. But not only the patterns of activity are brought into a trans-local context by the globalization process, but also their ‘rationality,’ which is to say the set of rules whereby the local may be acted upon ‘intelligently’ (p. 291). In this ongoing unfolding of the process, heretofore local activities attain a ‘reciprocity,’ ‘coherence’ and ‘correspondence’ to other globalizing activities (p. 294). Now of course encounters brought about through the globalization process don’t always achieve ‘synergy,’ but sometimes find themselves in conflict with one another and try to ‘interfere’ with one another’s aspirations to global validity, as can happen, for instance, with various forms of medical treatment. But such conflicts, Kettner insists, do not detract from the ‘initial abstract’ validity of the concept of globalization he advocates, for it is the ‘schematic’ tendency of the local toward universal recognition that marks participation in the process. Though he acknowledges that globalizing processes can be in certain ways subject to ‘centralization,’ Kettner rejects an identification between ‘globalization’ and the foregoing precedents of European colonialism and the present and ongoing attempts at an American version of cultural imperialism. After all, it is the ‘media’ of globalization processes that are most essential to their unfolding, and not the content at any one particular time. The primary media for the process are forms of communication, with the telegraph and telephone now being overtaken by the Internet, which, in its very conception, is a globally instantaneous form of ‘interaction’ through which ‘flexible identities’ meet and transform one another. He insists that his suggested conceptual approach to defining globalizing processes has only a ‘practical intention,’ and not one whose content has been predetermined by foregoing events (p. 296).

From these summaries, the strengths and usefulness of this collection of essays on intercultural discourse should be clear. In terms of its philosophical significance, the volume puts at the reader’s disposal a wide array of valuable interdisciplinary perspectives that philosophers are at times wont to ignore. As noted above, it also challenges those engaged in cross-cultural thought, often in highly individualized and experimental or speculative studies, to take methodological and hermeneutic considerations more seriously as presuppositions of their work. While many of the essays challenge the viability of universals and cultural essences that all-too-frequently stand in the way of cross-cultural thought, few really employ conceptual and hermeneutic resources from other traditions than the Western one to participate in the discussion. But perhaps the contributions to this volume, in their collective force, can inspire and provoke such ongoing responses. A single-volume ‘handbook’ like this one on intercultural discourse featuring a culturally and disciplinarily diverse group of accomplished scholars is a most welcome addition to the ‘comparativist’ literature.