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Review

## The Ethics of Intercultural Communication

### Introduction

For some time, the role of culture in language education within schools, universities and professional communication has received increasing attention (Corbett, 2003). This area of pedagogic activity is referred to as 'intercultural communication'; the attribute of being able to communicate with interlocutors from other cultures is termed 'intercultural competence' (Feng, Byram & Fleming, 2009); and a person who possesses this attribute has been dubbed the 'intercultural speaker' (Kramsch, 1998; Byram, 2008, pp. 57-77). The aim of this paper is to disclose, critique and circumvent the implicit ethical imperative which underwrites this area of inquiry. Indeed, across many areas of contemporary discursive practice there appears to be an incitement to communicate with the other, the ethical grounds for which remain undisclosed and unproblematised. The central argument in the paper identifies two 'aporias', in the sense of untraversable boundaries, logical contradictions or antinomies (Derrida, 1993), which arise from the ontological and axiological assumptions of intercultural communication: first, they contain an unstated impetus towards a universal consciousness; second, the truth claims of much of intercultural communication (IC) discourse are grounded in an implicit appeal to a transcendental moral signified. Inter alia, we contend that these features constitute the study of intercultural communication as 'totality' (Levinas, 1969/2007, 1998/2009) or as a 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida, 1976, 1978, 1981). We then propose more considered and radical ethical grounds for intercultural pedagogy and praxis.

### Intercultural Consciousness

Intercultural communication aims to encourage mutual understanding and dialogue across cultural divides in ways that not only consolidate the communities to which its members belong, but also win over the sceptical. In particular, it seeks to raise awareness of the role of language in constituting national and supra-national identities and cultures (Holliday, 2010). This includes not only subscribing to radical intercultural pedagogies (Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001), but also envisaging more cosmopolitan subjects who traverse the transnational terrain with openness towards, and tolerance of, the other (Starkey, 2007). These goals are often expressed as a desire

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3 for the transformation of intercultural consciousness, and are realized pedagogically through  
4 bringing about a deep-seated change in the mind or consciousness of the intercultural speaker,  
5 e.g.:

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10 Through competence-based IC training, trainers can mindfully transform the mindsets,  
11 affective habits and behavioural routines of the trainees and help them to communicate  
12 adaptively across cultures (Ting-Toomey, 2010, p. 21).  
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16 Furthermore, in the context of the expanding European Union (EU), Byram (2008) proposes that  
17 such a transformation embrace a measure of democratic participation – not just within the  
18 political culture of the nation state, but also within that of pan-national political groupings.  
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21 [E]ducation for intercultural citizenship expects to create change in the individual, to  
22 promote their learning. Becoming an intercultural citizen involves psychological and  
23 behavioural change including change in self-perception and understanding of one's  
24 relationships to social groups (p. 187).  
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29 Such pedagogic goals contain a weak and a strong claim with regard to the intercultural  
30 speaker's sense of self. The weak claim suggests that the intercultural speaker is able to  
31 recognise difference in the beliefs, attitudes and values of the other, and tolerate this difference.  
32 This already entails a certain shift in the speaker's self-consciousness. The strong claim is that  
33 the intercultural speaker recognises difference in the beliefs, attitudes and values of the other,  
34 embraces them and in so doing becomes 'transcultured'. For example, some form of hybridized  
35 consciousness appears to be entailed in Kim's (2005) socio-psychological account of cross-  
36 cultural adaption, positioned within the mainstream, functionalist strand of US intercultural  
37 communication.  
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46 [A]n increasingly intercultural identity and selfhood emerges from extensive  
47 experiences of stress and adaptation. In this process, we are likely to see a blurring of  
48 lines between 'us' and 'them.' Our old identity is never completely replaced by another.  
49 Instead, our identity is transformed into something that will always contain the old and  
50 the new side by side to form a perspective that allows more openness and acceptance of  
51 differences in people, an understanding of 'both-and', and a capacity to participate in  
52 the depth of aesthetic and emotional experience of others (pp. 395-6).  
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3 The strong claim is commonly implied by much of the literature in the field, as a construct which  
4 sits below the surface of the discourse and is not in plain view. Asante and Yoshitaka (2008), for  
5 example, in commenting on the IC field in a recent collection, indirectly draw our attention to it.  
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9         Scholars writing in intercultural communication have seen the tremendous advance  
10         made by expanded consciousness [...]. Implied in all of the selections in this collection  
11         is the idea that the people of the world can communicate. There is a sense that we are  
12         against conflict and in support of the harmonious coexistence of humans [...]. It is  
13         actually the only reason why we communicate, that is, to make ourselves understood in  
14         ways that produce harmony (p. 6).  
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20 It is often in the dual notions of an expanded consciousness and the harmonious (co)existence of  
21 peoples that IC discourse frequently implies the strong claim, because both are dependent upon a  
22 conception of wholeness, or a movement towards wholeness as the basis of their comprehension.  
23 It follows then that if existing human consciousness is limited and needs to be expanded, then  
24 intercultural consciousness must be a more complete consciousness, or at least a consciousness  
25 that is moving towards an ideal of completeness. If we support the harmonious concord of  
26 humans as an end goal, then the parallel implication is that it requires an intercultural  
27 consciousness that is equal to the task. It seems to us, therefore, that there is an implicit endpoint  
28 to the strong claim of intercultural communication, which actually goes against the grain of the  
29 recognition of difference according to which the field of intercultural communication subsists.  
30 This is the development of a universal consciousness in which difference is effaced. That this  
31 projected endpoint – the desire for oneness – may be temporally beyond a statement's immediate  
32 intent, does not negate the fact that it is still present beneath the surface of the discourse. It is  
33 this desire for oneness which provides the strong claim's 'metaphysics of presence'. By this we  
34 refer to an implied desire for conceptual fulfilment and purity in the discourse, in the process of  
35 which the consciousness of the intercultural speaker is transformed and the difference between  
36 the self and the other erased.  
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52 In this respect, IC discourse appears to echo the oneness of the Hegelian dialectic, according to  
53 which the history of humankind involves the transformational development of the collective  
54 human spirit towards full consciousness:  
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3 World history merely shows how the spirit gradually attains consciousness and the will  
4 to truth; it progresses from its early glimmerings to major discoveries and finally to a  
5 state of complete consciousness [...]. The principles of the national spirits in their  
6 necessary progression are themselves only moments of the one universal spirit, which  
7 ascends through them in the course of history to its consummation in an all embracing  
8 totality (Hegel, 1822/1999, p. 404).  
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14 Here, national identities appear as disparate ‘national spirits’ which are only elements in a wider  
15 global consciousness, that is, a ‘universal spirit’ (*Geist*) which is the totality of a collective  
16 consciousness. For Hegel, history marks the gradual transcendence of the circumscribed national  
17 spirits towards a universal ‘Spirit’ or ‘Mind’ by which humankind attains full consciousness.  
18 This occurs as a staged awakening of Mind: an incremental transformation of consciousness  
19 through time, towards an absolute knowledge and understanding which marks the end of history.  
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26 This drive towards universal consciousness appears to us to be a principal – although hitherto  
27 unacknowledged and untheorised – implication of IC discourse. The intercultural ideal is imbued  
28 with the Enlightenment principle of *presence* as the satisfactory repletion of ideas and outcomes,  
29 in which difference is resolved in favour of a rationally ordered ‘transcultural’ totality. This  
30 implicit momentum towards a universal consciousness constitutes our initial aporia in IC  
31 discourse; for the ontological impetus towards transculturalism in the form of an integrated  
32 human consciousness simultaneously implies closure, finitude and the resolution of difference  
33 within what is supposed to be an antinomic intercultural terrain. In other words, by presupposing  
34 ‘oneness’, IC discourse systematically effaces the premise of its own ontology – the irreducible  
35 relation to the other. Thus, by means of the passage from the many to the one, intercultural  
36 communication brings about its own dissolution.  
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### 48 49 **Truth and Transcendentalism**

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51 To achieve these transformations, interculturalists frequently adopt an interventionist stance  
52 which appeals to the transcendental. That is, they contribute rhetorically and materially to the  
53 transnational public sphere in order to promote co-operation, reduce conflict and improve human  
54 rights (Phipps, 2007a; de Souza, 2006), and they do so by appealing to an implied higher order of  
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3 morality by which the differences that exist may be adjudicated and in some manner resolved.  
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5 For example, referring to ‘critical cultural awareness’, Guilherme writes:  
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9 [C]ritical cultural awareness [...] may be defined as *a reflective, exploratory, dialogical*  
10 *and active stance [...] that allows for dissonance, contradiction, and conflict as well as*  
11 *for consensus, concurrence, and transformation. It is a cognitive and emotional*  
12 *endeavour that aims at individual and collective emancipation, social justice, and*  
13 *political commitment* (2002, p. 218; original emphasis).  
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18 Here Guilherme appeals, amongst other things, to transcendental ideals of emancipation and  
19 social justice as goals of critical cultural awareness. Taking a more explicitly interventionist and  
20 ethically motivated position, Salzman argues for a ‘just globalization’:  
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24 What to do? We can work to build just world (*sic*) based on a ‘just globalization’ [...].  
25 We can, through education and enlightened representatives of our diverse humanity,  
26 make salient the affirmative, humane values existent in all religions and cultural  
27 traditions. We can work to make salient the ‘higher angels of our nature.’ The  
28 affirmative and high values of mercy, justice, love, and compassion exist and find  
29 correspondence across belief systems. It is these we must make salient from the pulpit  
30 to the school (2008, p. 326).  
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36 Here Salzman makes explicit appeal to ‘high values’ in the transcendental plane as a means of  
37 solving the intercultural problems of the immanent plane – i.e. the plane of lived existence. The  
38 positions of Guilherme, Salzman and others can be regarded, then, as the ‘critical-  
39 transformational’ ethical arm of IC discourse. Its spokespersons intend to increase people’s  
40 awareness of manipulation, exploitation, discrimination and abuse in the world against an (often)  
41 implied foundational ethical premise; and to move them to act upon it. This sense of  
42 transformational purpose sees the desedimentation of subjectivities as positive and productive,  
43 because it gives strength to the hope that, “things might be different some day” (Adorno, 1973, p.  
44 323). For Giroux, this ethical interventionism is a principal role of the public intellectual:  
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54 [W]e have obligations at least to inaugurate a discourse around the unrepresentable, that  
55 which cannot be spoken within social relations, particularly within groups that know  
56 that generally to speak is to be punished [...]. [A]s a public intellectual I have the  
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3 obligation to rewrite the narratives of possibility for those who have occupied subject  
4 positions where that hasn't been possible before (2005, p. 158).  
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8 Why we have these obligations, and where they come from, is not made explicit by Giroux, or  
9 others, but is presupposed. That they exist however is not in doubt – the implication in IC  
10 discourse is that they are transcendentally given.  
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14 It is the legitimacy of these critical-transformational claims to truth that leads to our second  
15 aporia. As with any claim to truth, these propositions can imply a right to determine for others  
16 what counts as truth. Moreover, it remains unclear what distinguishes these truths from other  
17 'truths' to which a critical-transformational discourse is often opposed, such as economic  
18 neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism; and specifically what makes critical interventionist  
19 truths 'truer' than these others. There is also the risk in what we are calling critical-  
20 transformational truths that they simply become elements in a wider intercultural 'meta-  
21 narrative' (Lyotard, 1984), an overarching template for explaining the intercultural whole.  
22 Problems arise when the meta-narrative encounters those whose own claims contradict its own.  
23 These might possibly include neo-conservatives, nationalist political parties and fundamentalist  
24 groups of any religious persuasion. If the discourse of these groups is at odds with critical-  
25 transformational discourse, the following 'aporetic' questions arise: To what extent can a critical  
26 transformational discourse refuse to engage in a transformational dialogue with these others; and  
27 closely related to this, on what ethical grounds might it assert preference for its claims over the  
28 claims of these others? To address these questions it is necessary to explore a further set of  
29 grounds on which IC discourse can construct propositions and positions regarding prejudice,  
30 equality and human rights; and how it is possible to assert that a particular 'intercultural' claim  
31 should prevail.  
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49 It seems to us that current articulations of the critical-transformational discourse of intercultural  
50 communication, as evidenced by Guilherme and Salzman above, are grounded in an implicit  
51 appeal to a transcendental signified. That is, a *noumenon* or 'moral theism' existing outside  
52 human experience, against which intercultural claims can be measured and judgements made. In  
53 the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/2003), Kant saw the operation of the moral noumenon as a  
54 *priori* to the world, and distilled it in his work in terms of a faith that it was there. That is, he  
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3 believed that it existed, but also that it was impossible to step outside our world to see it, know it  
4 or experience it. This led Kant into moral contradiction, which despite the categorical imperative  
5 he was never satisfactorily able to overcome. With regard to intercultural communication this  
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7 Kantian aporia is revisited primarily through the discourse of tolerance, e.g.:

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12 There is little question that in the post September 11 cultural landscape, the need for  
13 tolerance among peoples of different faiths has become more urgent, especially in the  
14 war-torn Middle East, where religion inspired violence often turns homicidal and  
15 catastrophic (Abramovich, 2005: 295).  
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19 Similarly, drawing on the work of Berlin (1990), Byram (2006) proposes adjudicating between,  
20 “[cultural] values which one can condone, and those which are ‘beyond the pale’ of human  
21 reason and value” by reference to the (transcendental) principles contained in the *Universal*  
22 *Declaration of Human Rights* (p. 125).  
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28 Due to its emphasis on the ‘need for tolerance’, IC discourse finds itself in a Kantian moral bind.  
29 By asserting the claim that tolerance is the preferred ethical option, but being unable to give  
30 grounds – other than transcendently – for why this is so, the truth which such a claim  
31 presupposes becomes reduced to that of an opinion. If this truth is indeed an opinion, then not  
32 only is intercultural communication misleading itself about the implied universality of the ethic  
33 of tolerance, it also puts itself in the position of not having immanent – i.e. ‘here and now’  
34 grounds for adjudicating between competing truth claims. In this paper we understand the  
35 immanent to consist of the world within our possible lived experience of it. Just as the immanent  
36 critique of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Adorno, 1967, 1973) was concerned with critiquing the  
37 object on its own terms – i.e. from *within* – so an immanent critique of the ethics of cultural  
38 practice must navigate without the assured moral compass of tolerance to guide it. The implicit  
39 universal moral imperative of tolerance is a danger to interculturalists because it can lead in  
40 principle to ethical paralysis and inertia, particularly in the face of exorbitant acts of the other  
41 which on the aforesaid grounds they feel obliged against reason to condone. In our present times  
42 these include practices such as vaginal circumcision, wearing of the niqab, linguistic engineering  
43 (e.g. California’s Proposition 227), culture-based homophobia and the fetishism of the female  
44 form. Where the instinct is to react against such practices, interculturalists have relied too much  
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3 for their interventions on the transcendental idealism of Enlightenment thinking and the  
4 universalities of equality and human rights. If our responses to the cultural acts of the other are to  
5 become more ethically consistent, we need to devise explicit and persuasive *immanent* – as  
6 opposed to transcendental – grounds for the positions which we take so that we may not only  
7 adopt a more inwrought and intrinsic ethical stance, but still also move to ethical judgement as  
8 part of a necessary and ongoing reflexive intercultural *praxis*.  
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### 18 **Totality and Terror**

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20 This Enlightenment desire for plenitude and its appeal to transcendental idealism gives rise to  
21 similarly dramatic, yet philosophically distinct responses from Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques  
22 Derrida. Levinas sees it as ‘totality’ linked to violence and terror: “The visage of being that  
23 shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality” (1969/2007, p. 21). While Kant posited *a*  
24 *priori* transcendental concepts for the understanding of phenomena and the sensory intuition of  
25 space and time, for Levinas the processes of reason are executed through human consciousness,  
26 the *cogito*. Through the process of rationality, the other is constituted by perceptual *noesis* that  
27 obtains to the knowing subject. On this argument, in order to understand or to communicate  
28 purposefully with another person, we exercise our powers of reason upon them. However,  
29 through the very exercise of rational understanding we reduce the other to who we are, and the  
30 other becomes “part of the same” (1969/2007). The attempt to understand other people through  
31 categorizing, objectifying knowledge not only denies the immediacy and potential of the one-to-  
32 one relationship with others – “beings in the openness of being” – but also serves to dominate  
33 and possess them. In so doing, we carry out a “partial negation” of the other which constitutes an  
34 “act of violence” (1997, p. 8).  
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49 Derrida’s critique of totality arises from the violence of language and signification residing in the  
50 logocentric workings of the Saussurean sign (Derrida, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1988). In the first  
51 instance, the union of the signifier and the signified seems to satisfy a desire for a certain type of  
52 fulfilment, that of having a sound or mark which can be used to refer to a concept. But having  
53 seemingly named the concept, we find that the concept has no meaning except in its difference  
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3 from other signs, as there are no self-identical words or signs. Derrida names this *différance*;  
4 *différance* entails that there are no *pure* signs – “there is no experience consisting of *pure*  
5 presence” (1988, p. 10; original emphasis). For example, the ‘inside’ can never be a *pure* inside,  
6 because it is dependent on there being an ‘outside’. For this reason Derrida demonstrates how  
7 the essence of the signified must be formally prior to the sign, and that fulfilment, or ‘pure  
8 presence’, cannot be claimed except by making recourse “in favour of a meaning supposedly  
9 antecedent to *différance*, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis.  
10 This is [...] the presence of what we called [...] the ‘transcendental signified’ (Derrida, 1981, p.  
11 29). On these terms the transcendental signified is the signified to which all signifiers ultimately  
12 refer; it is the place where meaning comes to rest in itself. If the transcendental signified is prior  
13 to the sign, it is, like Kant’s *noumenon*, a-discursive and a-historical, outside our experience,  
14 unknowable. The transcendental signified is the object of the human longing for fulfilment and  
15 plenitude – a craving for the unfulfilled unity of the sign itself.  
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28 The longing for presence does violence to the sign by seeking to ‘fix’ its concepts against the  
29 transcendental signified. For Derrida, this is an impossibility. The transcendental signified is not  
30 present to us, it is *outside* the text, of which there is “no outside” (Derrida, 1976, p. 156).  
31 Meaning, therefore, cannot be ‘fixed’. In place of the absent signified, Derrida posits an endless  
32 chain of signifiers, one referring to the other *ad infinitum*.  
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39 The meaning of meaning ... is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of  
40 signifier to signifier ... its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocalness which  
41 gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages in its own economy so that  
42 it always signifies again and differs (1978, p. 29).  
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46 This entails that no meaning can ever be fully grasped in its entirety, in its full presence, because  
47 signifiers only refer and time does stop for them.  
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51 For critical-transformational interculturalists to make (implied) foundational claims about justice,  
52 tolerance and understanding is to do unintended violence to these concepts; for by  
53 unintentionally ‘fixing’ their meaning they potentially close them down. They also run into the  
54 danger of arrogating to themselves privileged access to the noumenal signified, the signified  
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*outside*. Asserting such entitlements is dangerous since the claims which ensue may then become organising principles, i.e. ‘truths’, against which the claims of others can then be judged. When a claim becomes an organising principle, it finds itself in conflict with other dissenting claims, and reacts with violence towards them. The western alliance’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Jihadism of Al-Qaeda are both examples of claims which are being used in this way. They each represent a will to truth which colonises the discursive terrain according to its own perceptions, based as they are on the presupposed obviousness of their own moral privilege.

### **Alterity, Difference and Signification**

The second part of this paper responds to the twin aporias identified above. To address the first, relating to the implications of a universal consciousness, we explore after Levinas (1969/2007, 1998/2009) the possibility of a non-totalising relationship between the self and the other. For Levinas, the source of the self is incontrovertibly located in its relation with the other. This subverts and supersedes the ontology of being as an autonomous ‘existent’ and challenges the orthodox ontology of presence that has underwritten western philosophy from Descartes to Heidegger, namely the self-consciousness of the self in its being in the world. For Levinas, the self is inextricably bound up with the other in as much as the same is unable to exist in its absence: “the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world within the ontology of sameness” (Levinas in Kearney 2004, p. 75). Furthermore, while in Hegelian thought the historical apogee of the relation between self and other entails the erasure of difference and the reconciliation of the self and other in the attainment of universal consciousness, for Levinas the maintenance of distance and separation through time is fundamental to existence: “a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance” (1969/2007, p. 41). This irreducible space gives rise to the ‘infinitely distant’ nature of the relation between same and other; while the surplus of being which the other presents to the same gives rise to its property of ‘transcendence’.

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3 The infinite and trans(a)scendent properties of this relation, then, do not entail the other being  
4 positioned in a negative, ‘antithetical’ relation *to* the self; but rather the self being aligned in a  
5 positive, constitutive relation *with* the other:  
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10 [T]he separation of the same with regard to the other [...] cannot rest on an  
11 opposition to the other which would be purely antithetical. Thesis and antithesis, in  
12 repelling one another, call for one another. They appear in opposition to a synoptic  
13 gaze that encompasses them; they already form a totality which, by integrating the  
14 metaphysical transcendence expressed by the idea of infinity, relativises it. An  
15 absolute transcendence has to be produced as non-integratable [...]. *Correlation*  
16 *does not suffice as a category for transcendence* (1969/2007, p. 53; original  
17 emphasis).  
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25 On this argument the ‘non-integrability’ of same and other becomes the originary condition for  
26 selfhood, and hence the *milieu* for the development of subjectivity.  
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32 Like contemporary interculturalists, Levinas describes the relation between the self and the other  
33 as being ‘accomplished’ through language (1969/2007). For Phipps (2007b) intercultural  
34 pedagogy is more a process of becoming through ‘languaging’ with the other, rather than an  
35 edifice of knowledge and understanding about the other. However unlike many interculturalists,  
36 this relation is not a symmetrical one, but rather is “such that the other, despite the relation with  
37 the same, remains transcendent to the same” (Levinas, 1969/2007, p. 39). Furthermore, while the  
38 idea of the ‘cultural’ emerged from language education as a necessary contextualization of *a*  
39 *priori* linguistic systems (Corbett, 2003), for Levinas the relationship between self and other is  
40 autochthonous. Language arises from this ‘pre-existing’ relation and realizes it through arguably  
41 its most immediate form, speech. For the relation between self and other is “primordially enacted  
42 as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an ‘I’, as a particular existent  
43 unique and autochthonous, leaves itself” (1969/2007, p. 39). These forms of relational selfhood  
44 are not suspended until some eschatological, Hegelian future; but are located in the immanence  
45 of interhuman relations lived out in the here and now.  
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## Truth and the Ethical Relation

This section addresses our second aporia, the implicit transcendental appeal of a critical-transformational discourse. On this argument, if judgemental truths are caught up in the metaphysical complicity of a signed universe which cannot be critiqued without recourse to the sign itself – that is *from the inside* (Derrida, 1978), the premise for judgemental critique must also be derived from *within* a system of knowledge in which ethical concepts are not outside dependent, i.e. based on transcendentals. In order to push ethical practice along this internal path Levinas distinguishes between two interdependent dimensions of the relation between self and other: the interhuman and the ethical.

The interhuman relationship emerges with our history, without being-in-the-world as intelligibility and presence. But it can also be considered from another perspective... – which transcends the Greek language of intelligibility – as a theme of justice and concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire which carries us beyond the finite Being of the world as presence. The interhuman is thus an interface: where what is ‘of the world’ qua phenomenological intelligibility is juxtaposed with what is ‘not of the world’ qua ethical responsibility (Levinas in Kearney, 2004, p. 74).

The interhuman dimension is again familiar to us from those sciences in which humans are viewed “as citizens, as individuals, as a multiplicity in a genus”. From this perspective, the study of intercultural communication has veered towards a concern with knowledge and functionality, rather than with truth and justice. However, on Levinas’s account, ethics precedes ontology as ‘first philosophy’:

Pre-existing the disclosure of being in general taken as the basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself (*sic*); preexisting the place of ontology is the ethical plane (1969/2007, p. 201).

The theme of “justice and concern for the other as other” disrupts the ontology of presence by always already preceding it and providing the grounds for ethical relations between human beings.

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3 This ethical movement towards the human other is always preferable as difference than as unity:  
4 “sociality [...] is better than fusion”. It is this irreducible other that Levinas names ‘the face’  
5 (1969/2007, pp. 194-201); and the approach of the self to the face is the location of the ethical  
6 core of this relationship, “the most basic mode of responsibility”. The face of the other summons  
7 the ‘I’ through language, and invokes the obligation of the self to the other.  
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14 The ethical ‘I’ is subjectivity precisely insofar as it kneels before the other,  
15 sacrificing its own liberty to the more primordial call of the other...As soon as I  
16 acknowledge that it is ‘I’ who is responsible, I accept that my freedom is  
17 anteceded by an obligation to the other (Levinas in Kearney, 2004, p. 78).  
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22 In this way, Levinas’s conceptualization of ‘the face’ offers a critical-transformational  
23 interculturalism grounds for an ethics arising from the immanence of the relationship with the  
24 other rather than through a Kantian appeal to a transcendental moral signified.  
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29 Levinas goes on to argue that the responsibility of the self for the other is accomplished by its  
30 capacity to substitute itself for the other. In an expiative description, the self is described as  
31 ‘accused’, as ‘persecuted’, as ‘a hostage’: “...under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for  
32 everyone goes to the point of substitution” (1998/2009, p. 112). On this argument, the principles  
33 for action in relation to the other do not proceed from an ontologically bounded self that projects  
34 itself towards the other through an appeal to a set of transcendental ideals; but rather emanate  
35 from an asymmetrical relationship in which the self is positioned in an ethical relation of  
36 responsibility for the other.  
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45 Responsibility for another...precedes essence in it...I have not done anything and  
46 have always been under accusation – persecution. The ipseity, in the passivity  
47 with arche characteristic of identity, is a hostage (1998/2009, pp. 114-115).  
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52 Moreover, this ethical relation gives rise ‘primordially’ to the grounds of signification: “an  
53 exposure to the other, it is signification, is signification itself, the one-to-the-other to the point of  
54 substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is responsibility” (1998/2009, p. 54). These are  
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posited as fundamental to human existence in an ‘inversion’ of identity which ‘escapes’ conventional ‘relations’ in as much as these relations presume ontology.

### **Towards a Discourse Ethics of Responsibility**

We have identified two aporias within IC discourse: one emerges from its implicit impetus towards a universal consciousness, which is in contradiction with its declared principles of openness, tolerance and difference; the other arises from its grounds for truth being implicitly based on an appeal to a transcendental moral theism. The second part of this paper has attempted to circumvent these aporias, first, by outlining a more immanent relation between self and other in order to supersede the implication of universal consciousness; and second, by proposing that there is a way of reconstructing an intercultural praxis so that it is no longer dependent upon idealist claims to truth.

This ethical relation of responsibility is adopted and extended in the later work of Derrida (1999, 2001; Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000); and from this it is possible to extrapolate further immanent grounds for a critical-transformational intercultural praxis. On Derrida’s account, without an infinite responsibility to the other, “you would not have moral and political problems, and everything that follows from this” (in Critchley, 1999, p. 108). In other words, it is through responsibility, rather than through the foundationalist presuppositions of presence, that the discursive terrain remains open and that a non-normative ethics becomes possible. Without responsibility, the hope which is carried in the possibility of the other that things might be different one day, as well as the praxis which such hope implies, would be denied. By drawing on responsibility for the other, and therefore to a commitment to openness rather than closure, the point is not to determine whether different truth claims are good or bad, but whether putting a particular discourse or set of discourses into practice might lead to a silencing of open alternatives; and therefore also a turning away from the other. That these alternatives should be open makes it possible for IC discourse to locate itself in opposition to perspectives and practices which interculturalists would normally associate with closure and intolerance, while simultaneously seeking to exercise *reflexive* support for more open alternatives, not because they know it is right to do so but because they know that not to do so would be an act of irresponsibility. In this way, the praxis of intercultural communication is able to supersede a



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3 universalist *telos* of tolerance, understanding and reconciliation by reaching a new (and ever-  
4 renewable) accommodation with the other, one which moves the discussion with the other on  
5 without reaching a conclusion. This then provides the grounds for denying the alterity of the  
6 other, when that alterity presents itself as received and final – *in extremis* and exorbitant – as in  
7 the widespread cultural presentation of homosexuality as ‘sin’, the linguistic engineering of  
8 California’s Proposition 227, and the culturally-legitimated oppression of women by means of  
9 the niqab, vaginal circumcision and the fetishism of the female form. There have to be grounds  
10 for questioning the supposedly culturally unquestionable, and for not welcoming the evidently  
11 unwelcome. The grounds for this are immanent rather than transcendental, and are based upon  
12 principles of openness and responsibility as ethical bulwarks against discursive closure and  
13 cultural introversion.  
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26 We therefore propose (after Levinas and Derrida, *op. cit.*) a discourse ethics of responsibility  
27 whereby it becomes possible for an intercultural praxis to engage critically and transformatively  
28 with regard to the exorbitant cultural acts of the other. This does not entail that interculturalists  
29 must automatically forgive in the moment that they are summoned to forgiveness; but rather that  
30 they must consider whether their forgiveness might entail a sanctioning of the other’s practice,  
31 and a closure and acceptance of eschatological finitude. Nor does it entail that interculturalists  
32 should accept the unacceptable just as they accept other acts of the other. In intercultural  
33 responsibility ‘tolerance’ is rejected; for tolerance is a form of charity. As Derrida puts it:  
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42 If I think I am being hospitable because I am being tolerant, it is because I wish  
43 to limit my welcome, to retain power and maintain control over the limits of my  
44 ‘home’, my sovereignty, my ‘I can’ (my territory, my house, my language, my  
45 culture, my religion, and so on) (2003, p. 128).  
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51 Tolerance declares to the other that their acts are being entertained under sufferance, and that  
52 these acts are at one and the same time subject to a privileged hegemonic order of the self.  
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3 The *extremis* and exorbitant acts of the other which are in conflict with an intercultural discourse  
4 that is obliged against reason to countenance them, are unacceptable because of the way in which  
5 truth is employed to justify their perpetration. The employment of truth as an organising  
6 principle leads to an iteration of certain types of practice which over time pass under the banner  
7 of 'tradition'. Religion does this by claiming a moral foundation in tradition, science by  
8 claiming an unquestioned, self-legitimizing universality. In both cases a privileged signified is  
9 employed as truth, and by this means each closes itself off from public interrogation. What this  
10 suggests is that tradition in intercultural communication should never be accepted as giving  
11 privileged warrant for any type of cultural practice, but should always be rigorously questioned,  
12 problematised and deconstructed.  
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23 In conclusion, while we may not be able to supersede the aporias in IC discourse which we have  
24 identified, there are alternative pathways through which it is perhaps possible to circumvent  
25 them. To avoid the Hegelian impetus towards universal consciousness implicit in IC discourse  
26 we posit an irreducible distance and separation between the self and other; in so doing not only  
27 are we able to bypass the field's implicit appeal to the transcendental as the source of truth but  
28 also to counter the exorbitant claims and actions – out of 'tradition' – of the (intercultural) other.  
29 Thus, the ethical grounds for intercultural praxis derive from an immanent "non-reciprocal  
30 relation of responsibility" between the self and the other (Bettina, 2008). In "the human struggle  
31 to make meaning" (Phipps, 2007b, p.19), it is necessary to strive not to finish with just *the one* –  
32 but all the time to keep a reflexive eye on *the many*. This way, the radical otherness of the other  
33 is preserved; for a critical intercultural praxis keeps the space between same and the other open  
34 in expectation and hope without ever needing arrival and acceptance. In intercultural  
35 communication we are obligated to sustain an incitement to responsibility and all that this  
36 entails, because, following Derrida, "pure unity or pure multiplicity [...] is a synonym of death"  
37 (1997, p. 13). In our quest for the intercultural we therefore favour the multiple over the  
38 singular, the variable over the stable and the mess over the arranged.  
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