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Intercultural transformation of philosophy and society as an alternative to crisis

Abstract: This paper explores dialogical philosophy. It analyzes the contributions of Raúl Fornet-Betancourt to the advancement of intercultural philosophy. His concept of the cultural embedding of philosophical thinking introduces a new perspective in our understanding of what philosophy is, of the history of philosophy, and of its role in today's society. The analysis is focused on Fornet-Betancourt's project of intercultural transformation of philosophy, viewed as an important step toward an intercultural transformation of thinking and acting, so that people with different cultural or religious backgrounds can live together in solidarity. It addresses the problem of the interrelationship between the culturally specific and the universal in philosophy. In contrast to "abstract universalism", Fornet-Betancourt offers an alternative understanding of universality as "plurality in dialogue", defined in terms of solidarity and coexistence. In facing the social, political, cultural, and anthropological crisis, intercultural philosophy serves as the basis for a comprehensive response to crisis through the critique of its root cause and guides the search for alternatives.

Key words: cultural diversity; dialogue; intercultural philosophy; transformation; universalism.

Among the various "turns" in philosophy (ontological, hermeneutic, linguistic), Mikhail Bakhtin saw the turn from the *monologic* paradigm to the *dialogic* paradigm as the main event in twentieth-century philosophy. Dialogical philosophy was developed by Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner, and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others as an alternative to philosophical monologism. Bakhtin has grounded the universal character of dialogue. As he wrote, "*Dialogic relationships ...are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life — in general, everything that has meaning and significance.*" (1984, p. 40) Dialogic relationships also include intercultural relations as "dialogue of cultures". This gives us a key for understanding of the contemporary world crises in terms of the Bakhtinian contrast between monologic thinking in the one-dimensional world of domination and authoritarian dicta versus dialogic thinking in the pluralistic world of diverse cultures, recognition of the others as equals, personal moral responsibility and shared conviviality, and an openness toward the cultural-historical creativity of individuals.

I see the Bakhtinian groundbreaking spirit in intercultural philosophy creatively advanced by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt. His project of intercultural transformation of philosophy contributes substantially to the contemporary quest for new ways of philosophical thinking in a culturally diverse and conflicted world. His critical reflections on the problems of today's world from the intercultural-philosophical

perspective help us to better understand their root causes, as well as their possible solutions and alternatives.

I became familiar with Raúl Fornet-Betancourt first through his publications back in the early 1980's, and later on met him in person. At that time I was working as a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, where my colleagues and I were interested in the emerging phenomenon of Latin American Philosophy. We have published several articles and books on this topic. My article "Latin American Philosophy of Liberation" was the first on the topic published in the journal *Voprosy Filosofii* in 1985, and a collective monograph entitled *The History of Philosophy in Latin America in the XX Century* was published in 1988 by "Nauka" ("Science") – the Publishing House of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This sparked a vivid response on the part of the Latin American philosophers. In striving for recognition, they were appreciative that the emerging Latin American Philosophy had first found recognition and appreciation abroad among Russian philosophers.

Those publications paved the way for correspondence and the beginning of the dialogue between Russian and Latin American philosophers, showing many commonalities in viewpoints regarding relationships of philosophies to cultural traditions, as well as solidarity in concerns about the problems of today's world and the search for their solutions.¹

Raúl Fornet-Betancourt and I started a collaboration in his journal *Concordia: International Journal of Philosophy*, to which I had served as the Coordinator for Russia. This journal, as well as its monographic series *Concordia – Reihe Monographien*, edited by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (62 published volumes), continue to be an important forum for the intercultural communication of like-minded philosophers from many countries of the world.

As a champion of intercultural dialogue, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt contributes to both its theory and practice. He played a key role in organizing the inter-philosophical cross-cultural conferences. In 1985 he organized the "First German-Latin American Ethics Session" in Buenos Aires. It was the beginning of a series of seminars as a program of dialogue coordinated by Fornet-Betancourt in response to the need for an intercultural dialogue in philosophy, which would help to overcome the traditional dominance of Eurocentric discourse and open a space for intercultural thinking. Two main ethical currents came to the forefront in this dialogue: Discourse Ethics and the Philosophy of Liberation, represented respectively by Karl-Otto Apel and Enrique Dussel. The first seminar on the "Philosophy of Liberation: Foundations of Ethics in Germany and Latin America" took place in 1989, in the Catholic Academy of the Archdiocese of Freiburg. "Discourse Ethics and Ethics of Liberation" was the theme of the second seminar which took place in 1991 in Mexico City. This seminar continued on a regular basis on

¹ This was mentioned in my article: Demenchonok E., 1996, "Latin American Philosophy in Russia", *Concordia* 29, pp. 79-94.

different themes in both Europe and Latin America, including Brazil, Salvador and other countries. Participating in the seminars were philosophers from Latin America, United States, Germany, Austria, France, Spain and other countries.

The dialogue is beneficial for both Latin American and European philosophies. It allows Latin American philosophy to have an international platform and to enter into closer contact with the philosophies of Europe and other regions of the world. On the other hand, European philosophy gains a new experience in this dialogue: it is challenged by forms of thinking different from its own, which do not imitate its style and forms of rationality, but rather are rooted in their own historical-cultural context and therefore offer different modes of interpretation. Each philosophy in dialogue with the other is better able to see its own image, as in a mirror. The interrelations of culturally different philosophies help to overcome the West-centric or any other “centrist” views by becoming open toward a pluralistic and broader view of today’s world.

In response to the necessity of giving full consideration to Intercultural Philosophy, Raúl Fonet-Betancourt took the initiative in another program: the creation of the International Congresses of Intercultural Philosophy. The First Congress took place March 6-10, 1995, in Mexico-City. Philosophers from various continents participated in it. At the opening of the Congress, Fonet-Betancourt defined its programmatic purposes: “This Congress starts a long-range program to contribute to the transformation of philosophy based on the achievements of the various cultural traditions of Humankind” (1996, p.13). This new approach aims to transform philosophy itself, from the intercultural perspective, and to develop a new type of philosophical thinking, namely, intercultural thinking and coexistence of different cultures in the interrelated world.

The second International Congress of Intercultural Philosophy took place on April 6-11, 1997, in São Leopoldo, Brasil (UNISINOS - University del Vale do Rio dos Sinos). The third Congress took place on November 22-25, 1999, in Aachen, Germany. Along with sessions on various aspects of intercultural philosophy, there were special sections devoted to intercultural dimensions in Asian, African, Afro-American, Latin American, and European thought. The theme of the fourth Congress in September 16-21, 2001, Bangalore, India, was “Interaction and Asymmetry between Cultures in the Context of Globalization”. This program was successfully continued, and the eleventh International Congress of Intercultural Philosophy took place on September 17-20, 2015 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Its theme was “Traditions of formations, spirituality and university: Toward an intercultural transformation of higher education”.

Based on the revised papers of each of the congress, Raúl Fonet-Betancourt has published edited volumes, thus making available the ideas discussed at the congresses to the public.²

² For example, the papers of the recent, eleventh International Congress of Intercultural Philosophy, were published in volume: Fonet-Betancourt R., (Hrsg.), 2015, *Bildungstraditionen, Spiritualität und Universität. Dokumentation des XI. Internationalen Kongresses für Interkulturelle Philosophie*,

Raúl Fornet-Betancourt contributes not only to the practice of intercultural dialogue, but also to its theory. He is truly an original philosopher. At the heart of his philosophical works is a project of the intercultural transformation of philosophy, viewed in a broader sense as an important step toward an intercultural transformation of thinking and acting, so that people with different cultural or religious backgrounds could live together in a more peaceful and humane world.

The concept of the cultural embedded philosophical thinking introduces a new perspective in our understanding of what philosophy is, of the history of philosophy and of its present role in today's society. The intercultural transformation of philosophy has a twofold task. First, a philosophy has to review critically its way of thinking and to expose the "monocultural" limitations of its concepts. A philosophy, based on the intercultural approach, can open itself to new possibilities of reflection, which does not reduce cultures but rather unites them. Unlike comparative studies, the intercultural approach aims "to reconfigure philosophy through the interchange and solidarity of the diverse configurations in the cultural traditions of the Humankind" (Fornet-Betancourt, 1996, p. 13). Its second task is related to the social role of this transformed philosophy, which should be able to develop ideas and approaches helpful to confronting the challenges of our time. These challenges come mainly from the fundamental contradiction between the homogenizing tendency of hegemonic globalization and "the dialectics of the cultural resistance of the peoples that want to reaffirm their right to the political, economic, and cultural self-determination" (ibid., p. 12).

The transformation of philosophy, based on intercultural dialogue, is so significant that Fornet-Betancourt considers it a new paradigm. First of all, it denotes radical changes in the theoretical framework for understanding philosophical questions, in light of the fundamental role of culture in the development of philosophy. Second, intercultural philosophy is situated above the rationalism and subjectivism of modernity, above the limitations of analytical philosophy, and is an alternative to the nihilism of postmodern philosophers. Third, the call for a new, community oriented and culturally rooted style of philosophizing is in tune with the quest for a new way of thinking and acting, so that the people with different cultural identities can live together in solidarity.

In asserting cultural diversity, intercultural philosophy brings to the forefront the problem of the interrelationship between the culturally specific and the universal in philosophy. For some philosophers, in the debate surrounding this problem, the notions "Latin American," "African" or "intercultural" seemed to be incompatible with philosophy as universal knowledge, while others exaggerated the culturally specific as opposed to the universal. These views apparently assume the insurmountable opposition particular–universal. Instead, intercultural philosophy offers an original approach by

Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz, Aachen. Recently he also published the first edited volume regarding the intercultural philosophy in different countries of the world: Fornet-Betancourt R., (Hrsg.), 2015, *Zur Geschichte und Entwicklung der Interkulturellen Philosophie*, Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz, Aachen.

developing a broader and more pluralistic concept of philosophy, viewed as embedded in certain cultural and philosophical traditions while dealing with perennial questions, and aiming to give universally valid answers.

In contrast to “abstract universalism”, Raúl Fornet-Betancourt offers an alternative understanding of universality as “plurality in dialogue”, emerging dialogically from the plurality and supporting the alterity (2014, p. 67). Universality is viewed not as a goal in itself, but rather as a possible path for human beings toward the integrity of their humanity: “In other words, universality should be conceived and practiced as a process of increasing reciprocity, which aims to help the full realization of humanity of human beings in the conditions of living together in solidarity” (ibid., p. 70) Universality defined in terms of solidarity and coexistence, that is, as a “method for the transformation of current society oriented toward living together, can and should be understood as a political and social program for the change in the currently predominant material conditions” (ibid., p. 71).

Moreover, this quest for radical transformation goes even further, because “living together makes necessary an anthropological turn in the current human type” (2014, p. 71). This means that the alternative universalization can be realized only if human beings would abandon the current fragmented “image of man” and would transform themselves through “the unfolding of the relationships of reciprocity and of the community” (ibid., p. 71). In facing a social, political, cultural, and anthropological crisis, intercultural philosophy serves as the basis for a comprehensive response to crisis through the critique of its root cause and guides the search for alternatives.

In contrast to the deterministic ideologies of the status quo, Fornet-Betancourt highlighted the view of history as open and that changes are possible: philosophy based on the intercultural perspective can help us to better understand that historical development is neither unilinear nor predetermined but rather is open and has various possibilities and alternatives. This philosophy can serve as a basis for orienting people in today’s world and in the search for solutions to social and global problems which threaten the future of humanity.

Raúl Fornet-Betancourt is the author of more than two dozen books and many articles in several languages. Being a champion of intercultural dialogue, he himself represents the intercultural synthesis of the native Cuban culture and the German culture of his second homeland, and exhibits a genuine love of the multicolored cultures of the people of the world. His interest in other cultures is in-depth and spiritually driven: it is an effort to listen and to learn from the other, attempt to find in the wisdom of different peoples the paths to the answers to the ultimate philosophical and existential questions. He invites us to join him in this transcendental journey in search for our humanity. In flying high in his thought and ideals, he at the same time keeps his feet on the ground, witnessing the dark side of a conflicted world and human suffering from domination, violence, and starvation. Perhaps his love of people and his compassion toward the suffering of the other, who is deprived of the elementary conditions for a dignified life, makes this kind gentle and soft-spoken philosopher an unbending warrior against any

kind of discrimination and injustice. In so doing he stands on the firm ground of philosophy, asserting the fundamental role of dialogic relationships as constitutive of the human personality itself: “dialogue is the primordial substance from which human beings... develop their humanity and discern their situation in the world” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2016, p. 44). The full realization of this dialogical potential is viewed as the path toward the transformation of society and human liberation. His books can be read as thriller novels about the historical and ongoing struggle for human liberation, keeping the memory of the freedom-loving tradition and inspiring us to strive for a more humane alternative to the crisis of hegemonic civilization. His brilliant style, which combines refined philosophical culture with a publicist’s temperament, expresses the power of thought born of compassion and concern about human destiny.

Philosophical reflection on the theme of intercultural dialogue in the context of a world permeated by conflicts raises questions regarding the conditions of the possibility (or impossibility) of dialogue itself. Fornet-Betancourt analyzes the existential and historico-cultural conditions under which we practice dialogue. He refers to the negative consequences of the history of neocolonialism and wars, stating that “the realization of human dialogism is taking place within historical conditions which hinder it” (2016, p. 47). Philosophy should critique these negative conditions, such as asymmetries of power, hegemonic pretenses, domination, marginalization of traditional cultures, disregard of the other, and the social exclusion of a large part of the world population.

As an obvious contrast to dialogue we can also mention monological thinking and various forms of supremacist exceptionalism or fundamentalism, which are intolerant of differences and the other. Less evident, while also damaging, is the abuse of universalistic notions, such as dialogue, once they are downgraded to mere demagogical clichés or pseudo-philosophical sophistry.³

The critical task of philosophy is to show that domination and hidden exceptionalism (masked by hypocritical “political correctness”) and the resulting discriminatory attitude toward the other — those considered “developing nations,” minorities, foreigners, migrants, or outsiders — is a deeply rooted cause of many conflicts in the contemporary world. Constructively, philosophy should incorporate the “culture of reason” into public opinion and “show the path of dialogue as the only reasonable alternative leading toward the true humanization of history” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2016, pp. 49-50). The enhancement of dialogical relationships is both a condition and an indispensable means for progression toward a more humane, peaceful and just world order.

³ An example of such a simulacrum is idle talk about “universal dialogue” as pretended by a parochial group controlling the notorious “International Society for Universal Dialogue” (ISUD).

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