

Reflections about worldviews, the Western worldview and intercultural polylogue

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Introduction

This paper does not really follow the ‘guidelines for contributors’ as asked by the organisers. We will not describe innovative experiences or the way our worldview has guided personal experiences. Nor will we make suggestions for sustainable endogenous development. On the contrary, we will try to embark on a more theoretical journey and focus on the idea of a worldview in itself. The focus on the abstract level of worldviews might make this paper more difficult to read. Yet, if we want the world to be ruled on the basis of truly intercultural communication, on the basis of a polylogue instead of a liberalist monologue, in addition to making concrete suggestions, we will have to fully understand the concept of a worldview and the driving forces behind our own worldviews. Therefore, this article will examine the idea of a worldview. What is it? What does it consist of? As we will see, we consider a worldview to be a map that helps people to orient their lives and make sense of the chaos ‘out there’. A worldview serves to create order by moulding the world into mental categories and hence, to give meaning to the elements and events we see around us. At this early stage, it should be pointed out that most of these shaped categories we use to create order are implicit. In spite of this, we all unconsciously conceive of these categories as unquestionably ‘true’. In our view, this could be a phenomenon – of far greater importance than is currently recognised – which is hampering the process of a genuine, in-depth intercultural polylogue.

In this paper, we will first give a broader description of worldviews and follow up with a discussion of the ethical categories and the knowledge categories, as orientating maps. We will focus on the Western worldview to know what implicit baggage we, as Westerners, bring along in an intercultural encounter. Finally, we will look at some of the difficulties facing an intercultural polylogue.

A general depiction

The Centre Leo Apostel of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel defines a worldview as follows: ‘Worldview is a coherent set of bodies of knowledge, concerning all aspects of the world. This coherent set allows people to construct a global image of the world and to understand as many elements of their experiences as possible. A worldview can in fact be perceived of as a map that people use to orient and explain, and from which they evaluate and act, and put forward prognoses and visions of the future.’

This rather dense definition needs some explanation, which we will provide in the following points.

Inevitability of a worldview

As said in the introduction, people, all over the world alike, need to be able to understand the phenomena around them. The different elements influencing our lives need to make sense. If negative events such as pain, suffering or death happen to ourselves, friends, family or beloved animals, or if earthquakes or floods happen in the world, we need to be able to grasp these events, and give them a place within a framework of reference. If we cannot do so, if things are meaningless, it might influence our well-being, even to a point where we might become depressive or sick. But we also need to have some standards to evaluate our proper behaviour. To be moral, we need to know what is considered right and wrong. If we do not know this, we exclude ourselves from humankind. So we think it is erroneous to try to get rid of a framework or meta-narrative. Indeed, we believe that this is not possible. A worldview provides us with an answer to the most basic aspiration we have: the desire to be in contact with what we perceive as good, of central significance or of elemental value. We are always entrenched in a context, even if we think we are not¹.

The first-order ordering categories

In order to make the surrounding, unintelligible world meaningful and liveable, people make use of conceptualisations. They apply categorisations which bring order and make reality more comprehensible. 'Making use of conceptualisations' may sound as if this is a conscious process but the first-order ordering categories come about at the pre-reflective level. We do not really 'think' them up. The categories rather reflect what we experience as the world outside, prior to any conceptual notions. The implicit categories are built on what people have admired, questioned, feared and loved in the course of millennia.

The implicit, pre-conceptual categories differ from culture to culture, largely depending on time and place, which form the basis of experience. But the fact that categories differ is also due to the ordering principle itself. The different classifications people have in different cultures are all meant to (re)present reality. They order on the basis of what they see, live, experience. Yet, this experience can never be complete. Because of the very ordering principle itself, part of the outside world will always remain out of sight. Ordering is always also selective. We will illustrate this by comparing the Western worldview and the Andean worldview (Estermann, 1998)².

In the Western worldview, a main category for grasping the world at its purest is the category of 'being'. The world is conceived of as consisting, in the first place, of identities, such as humans, trees, animals. These identities have essentials:

¹ For Lyotard, one needs to be freed of a meta-narrative in order to take autonomous choices. Yet, if Lyotard says that there are no meta-narratives, he himself is creating a meaningful frame from which he is explaining and understanding the world, i.e. he cannot escape thinking, functioning and living within a frame either.

² For our description of the Andean worldview as well as for parts of our description of the main features of our own worldview, we borrowed some interesting insights from Josef Estermann, 1998. *Filosofía Andina. Estudio intercultural de la sabiduría andina*. Abyala-Yala: Quito Ecuador.

characteristics that are inherently part of their being. There are other characteristics which are considered contingent rather than substantial. A relation between entities is not regarded as an essential part of these identities, for instance. *First* there are two *separate* identities which only *next* have a relation. So autonomy as an inherent characteristic of an entity is a first-order ordering category through which Western people comprehend reality.

In the Andean world, it is the reverse. Relation is seen as a core category, maybe even *the* core category by which to grasp reality. Everything is relation. So, although in the Andean world it is philosophically not articulated as such, one could say that within the Andean worldview relation is seen as an essential characteristic of life, and hence, also of phenomena in the world. Both the Andean and the Western views of the world are pre-reflective interpretations of this experience of living in the world.

The first-order ordering category that we unconsciously take as a starting point will determine our approach to the world. We can take only one stance, and therefore inherently exclude others. For instance, we cannot perceive the world as essentially made up of autonomous substances and simultaneously believe that everything in the world is, in essence, relational. Once the first steps have been taken, more categories can be deduced from them. Yet, if one does not take the first step, it is very difficult to empathise with all the following steps.

The second-order ordering categories and cultural manifestations

The ordering of the world from an implicit pre-conceptual and pre-reflective level is fundamental for any culture. From this, further orderings or categorisations are deduced to create a model, a skeletal structure, a coherent frame by which to understand the surrounding phenomena. These deduced or second-order ordering principles in fact define the cultural realm. Examples of second-order categories for the Andean cultures are the principles of complementarity, reciprocity, cyclicity and integrality. Deduced categories typical of Western cultures include autonomy of the individual, rationality and duality. The difference between first and second-order ordering categories is not always very clear.

The second-order categories manifest themselves in at least three ways in a culture. Firstly, they get densely ramified in language, such as discourses, philosophical writings, oral traditions, moral sagas or fairytales³. Secondly, the institutional structures of a society are largely influenced by these categorisations. Examples are the way buildings are built, or the standards by which certain jobs are perceived as highly desirable, and others not. Thirdly, the deduced categories become manifest in daily habits or special cultural events. Gender roles, eating patterns, rituals, ceremonies and music festivals are all examples of this.

The deduced ordering categories are usually implicit and tacitly understood. Parents transmit values on how to behave and on how to conceive reality to their offspring. They do not express their thoughts in a systematically ordered discourse, but 'correct' their children whenever they perceive usage of the 'wrong' category. 'You behave like a girl', 'your dolls are not really alive, darling' are examples of such

³ One could maybe even describe these manifestations as third-order ordering categories, but we prefer to call them cultural manifestations.

corrections. Children learn even more by seeing and imitating the behaviour of close relatives and by gradually coming to fully comprehend the thoughts which are key to this behaviour. Because parents and children do not articulate this knowledge verbally, one could say that this knowledge is tacit and implicit, although it is not unconscious. Yet, for some persons, these deduced categories are more explicit. In Western culture, philosophers study these themes, acquiring in-depth insights. In other cultures, central community members, such as shamans or priests, consciously and explicitly express them, and are thus important transmitters of this knowledge. First-order categories are usually even more difficult to trace, but can be raised to the level of consciousness through a major archaeological effort in intercultural encounters.

First and second-order categories as 'right' and 'true' categories

The conceptualisations serving to try and understand the surrounding physical and social world are seen as 'true' and 'right'. Tacit, implicit knowledge, based on real-life experiences, is usually very deep-seated, to the extent that it seems intuitive, self-evident and unquestionable. This holds even more so for first-order than for second-order categories. As a result, the categories employed are not merely conceived of as a selection of categories but as the *only* categories corresponding to the truth/rightness principle. As we have said, the second-order categories are further worked out, and even petrified at times, in our thinking and acting. Making the categories more concrete by ways of institutions and laws, or scientific rules, reinforces their veracity and confirms the validity of findings handed down by previous generations. This is another reason why we do not question the categories that lie at the heart of our feeling, thinking (language) and acting.

A worldview as neither pure nor static

A worldview is built up of knowledge that has been gathered throughout the ages. It reflects the lived experiences of one generation after another. But people also borrow ideas from, or get thoughts about reality imposed upon them by other cultures. Cultures are always embedded in different kinds of (power) relations with other cultures. They are not isolated blocks. As a consequence worldviews will be a mirror of these interpenetrations arising from cultural contacts. Therefore, within one worldview, different meanings and conceptions may coexist. Inconsistencies will be smoothed out and rediscovered as inconsistencies only generations later, with new ones being introduced through new contacts or findings within the own cultures. Although changes occur through ongoing intercultural contacts, they usually do so at a very slow pace. This explains why people can still perceive their fundamental categories as 'true', 'right' and 'ours'.

Ethical categories and knowledge categories as orientating maps

The different cultures around the world all have their own specific ways of ordering reality, doing so on the basis of first and second-order foundational categories. Yet, at the risk of oversimplification, one could say that the core function of these

categorisations is their role of orientating in two ways: in an ethical way (categories concerning how to be 'good') and a knowledge-based way (categories that make clear what should be considered as 'true'). Of course, in reality both categories are almost always entangled. We divide them at a theoretical level into smaller pieces so as to be able to better understand the crucial aspects.

The ethical category

Charles Taylor (1989)⁴ is one of the most salient authors describing the basis of ethical categories. His work is tough to understand, but very clarifying on this subject, so it is well worth further examination.

As said before, a worldview is like a map, helping us in orienting our lives. Orientation has two aspects, which we could call an external aspect and an internal aspect. The external aspect refers to orientation in a more abstract way. To illustrate this, here is a simple example. If I go to a country which I do not know at all, I can buy a map to orientate myself. This map will provide me with the required external orientating information on the locations of cities and other landmarks, their mutual distances, their relative importance (size of dot on the map), and their interrelation (the number and nature of the different roads connecting the different places).

The internal aspect, on the other hand, relates to my own position inside the country. If I do not know a region, I will never be able to locate, for instance, a field of flowers. Suppose that someone takes me there blindfolded, takes off the bandage and tells me that the field in front of me is the field of flowers I wanted to see. I will then know where the field is (given I trust this person). But this knowledge is not really meaningful, since I cannot relate this flower field to other known points in this area.

When it comes to the ethical categories we want to make the following clear: a worldview offers a person an orientation on what is expected in terms of moral behaviour. All worldviews do this, including the Western worldview, although it does it less than other worldviews. What kind of life is worth living is a fundamental question, at the basis of human existence. A worldview orientates us with regard to who we are, and who we want to become. Returning to the example of the map, we not only need to know the locations of the cities on the map (the fundamental categories or core values) to guide us (which usually happens implicitly), we also need to have a sense of where we stand in relation to them. The worth of our lives will always be measured in terms of the ethical aspects of worldviews. In this sense, identity (even if not expressed as such in other cultures) is very much intrinsically interwoven with the ethical aspects of a worldview.

The Western ethical category

We will now go into more detail about the Western worldview in relation to this ethical aspect, and more precisely in regard to self-understanding. If one intends to start an intercultural polylogue and be a nuanced and enriching participant, one should

⁴ This part is based on Charles Taylor, 1989. Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity. University Press: Cambridge, part 2.

at least consciously know and have reflected on the kind of implicit ethical categories one is driven by and where one stands in relation to these categories.

As mentioned at the beginning, an important first-order ordering category of the Western worldview is that of substance. At the human level, this has been mentally translated into the category of autonomy of the individual (seen as a separate identity). Two main categories have been deductively attributed to this individual with an essence: *a rationality* and *a possibility to express this core*.

1. As for the *rationality*: of course, most other cultures – if not all – will confirm the rational characteristic of human beings, in the sense that all will agree on the human capability to reflect. Yet, what is different is the sub-ordering that follows from this rationality, or the cultural manifestations into discourses. Different cultures take different views of ‘being rational’. One does not autonomously choose what one considers rational or not. On the contrary, the first and second-order categories of each culture demarcate what is rational and what is not. The idea of rationality always restricts behaviours to a particular culturally delineated space, outside of which irrationality and chaos are deemed to reign.

One example of rational behaviour according to Western precepts is to think and act in an economic way, i.e. as *Homo economicus*. This is closely linked with efficiency. Another important feature of rationality is that of looking at the world from a position of disenchantment. Any perception of the world as ‘animated’ – a word that itself has negative connotations – is considered irrational. Again, another notion that is very powerfully associated with rationality is the well-known ideal of self-reliance and autonomy. Working hard to become successful is regarded as the best way to achieve this. This notion is more developed in North-America than in Europe, in general terms. As said, most of these notions are not articulated systematically but we are inculcated with them during childhood, so that we have internalised these values as ‘normal’ by the time we reach adulthood.

It is within this context of rationality that we understand ourselves. The space within which rationality is defined is also the space within which we orientate ourselves as to who we are (the map) and who we want to become (our place on the map). Yet, orientation is only possible when these associations are perceived as true. Therefore, we do not recognise rationality as being ‘associated with’ these features. From the Western perspective, rationality – truly – *is* these features. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to criticise these features, as some alternative movements try to do. If these features are seen as merging with rationality, it follows that any criticism of the features is equal to criticism of rationality *itself*. Notwithstanding this complexity, we think the Alterglobalisation movement has made gradual progress. Alternative ideas about rationality are gaining ground and start to coexist and compete with traditional perceptions within our worldview.

2. Next to rationality, *self-expression* is another major second-order ordering principle for understanding ourselves. As said, our worldview is very profoundly shaped by the interpretation of reality as substance. As a result, we believe in an essential core deep down inside ourselves that is waiting to be expressed or developed. We are all considered to have our own particularity, which we should go in search of in this life. By and large, the standards by which we measure success in life are to the degree to which people have succeeded in realising themselves and express this authenticity, for instance in art forms, such as dance and music. Self-expression and

rationality may also coincide, e.g. in people who become successful captains of industry, managers or scientists. It should be noted that in the last few decades, the idea of the self as a person's essence has been under discursive attack from philosophers, but this has not yet found resonance in society as a whole.

Although it is clear that one cannot judge these first and second-order categories, one can judge the way they are interpreted and manifested. The point we wish to make here briefly is that, in the West, the interpretation has gone wrong along the way. We have explained this in more detail in another article (Note, Pinxten & Aerts, 2005). The *combination* of all these implicit and subtle messages with regard to rationality and self-expression seems to lead people contradictorily to a way of life that political, philosophical and religious decision-makers have not foreseen and do not consider desirable. It unwittingly, but deeply, orientates people towards the idea that self-realisation comes *first* (before anything else) and/or to an attitude of self-interest (before anything else) as the main goals in life, as this is what gives life its genuine meaning. The guiding discourses very implicitly orient people towards seeing self-realisation and self-interest as the primary and authentic principles to follow. So people start considering it – in a very unconscious way – their duty to give preference to a certain individualised way of acting. Subtly, the combination of all the discourses on rationality and self-expression promotes the belief that it is unfair (not right) to ourselves, family, fellow citizens and the state if we do not develop or realise ourselves. The lives of people who do not follow this road are depicted as unsuccessful and meaningless, that is, insofar as they have no religious or moral reasons for adopting an ascetic attitude. We think that the imposition of such supposedly 'good' behaviour is one of the things that the Alterglobalisation movement is, implicitly, standing up against.

To conclude, we would to make it clear that, although there are second-order ordering categories relating to benevolence and adopted by many people as an orienting frame, they have become overshadowed by the other categories under the influence of such phenomena as secularisation and the discourse on cultural relativism in the field of anthropology. The challenge that society currently faces is to try and re-articulate the idea of benevolence, yet stripped of its religious meaning. The more this idea becomes discursively ramified, the greater the chance that people will unconsciously favour it again as a main good within their frame of reference. In the article referred to in Note et al. (2005), we make a preliminary attempt to re-articulate these values. We 'enlarged' our worldview by introducing two categories in addition to rationality and self-expression: the ethical category and the potential to be able to be situated in a larger meaningful whole.

The knowledge category

Knowledge about 'reality' is another pillar we use to orientate ourselves and form our visions of the world. As is the case with the ethical category, the two main questions here are: firstly, what are the standards by which we consider something to be true/what is the space within which something is called true, and, secondly, where do we stand within this frame of reference about truth? Although we have not yet done enough research to confirm this, it would seem that it is only in the Western worldview that truth and rightness have become separated the Western worldview, truth is the area of science, while rightness or justness is associated with the realm of

ethics. Both worlds are separated. In other cultures, both principles seem to have been less articulated, but they invariably play an implicit role in the first and second-order categories.

If we can gain insight into what is considered knowledge (truth) and into our position with regard to it, this will influence our standpoint in an intercultural polylogue.

The Western knowledge category

Fundamental and applied scientific knowledge is based on implicit first and second-order ordering categories. Again, an important category is the thought that the world is composed of autonomous things or substances. These substances are believed to have essential and contingent characteristics. It is further conceived that the true nature of reality can *only* be known through cognition. The senses, apart from sight, are deemed secondary in knowledge acquisition. They are not considered suitable for tracing the essential, underlying and determining characteristics of the world. It is believed that at some time in the future scientists will be able to make a grid of the *entire* essential and deterministic features, which, as a unifying theory, would explain why the world, and even the universe, is the way it is. Implicit in this knowledge acquisition is the notion that it will lead to better control of the world, not in a negative sense, but to gain insight into, to place, or be able to counter as much as possible the undesirable effects for human beings living on this planet.

Along this line of thought, two other implicit statements can be made. Firstly, it is very much believed that what we see fully corresponds with external reality⁵. Secondly, the researcher, as a person, does not play a role in knowledge acquisition. He or she is an objective, external observer who has no influence on the facts. As we already saw, neither of the two stances is feasible. Firstly, we can comprehend only part of reality. Looking is making sense. Making sense is ordering. Making sense and ordering is interpreting. It is impossible to have a complete overview of all aspects of reality. Secondly, first- and second-order categories inevitably also play a role in science. No observer can escape from their own frame of reference. *Mutatis mutandis*, one can never escape from one's own research context, which inevitably influences the conception of 'facts'.

In recent times, because of the influence of post-modernity and the quantum and relativity theories, scientists and philosophers alike have been obliged to abandon their traditional attitude of objectivism and determinism. History and philosophy introduced hermeneutics; quantum mechanics brought a worldview that was completely different from the Newtonian worldview in the sense that its findings showed us that reality is indeterminate too. In quantum mechanics, an experiment that is repeated will not yield exactly the same results every time. Indeed, the result is not predictable at all. One reason is the interwovenness of the participant with this reality. Put differently: reality is such that the observer changes it by his very participation.

In science and society, these two mutually exclusive ideas exist side by side. In science, some disciplines such as genetics, still build on the older ideas of Newton.

⁵ In philosophy, the idea that what one perceives and is able to articulate (in language) fully corresponds with what is perceived, is called the correspondence theory.

Other disciplines on the contrary are becoming increasingly influenced by the insights of quantum mechanics, and are making attempts to consider the consequences of these for their fields. Basically, these consequences are that the truth is not quite so absolute anymore, but has become instead a provisional truth. The public has also grown acquainted with these new ideas which have been popularised through television and books. Other areas, concerning the more serious social issues such as economics or politics, are still dominated by Newtonian views. The concepts of makeability and controllability, combined with the 'time is money' adage, create a powerful discourse on efficiency and rationalisation.

To return to the orientating function of a worldview: both mutually contradictory ideas about reality claim a 'truth' value. For a member of a community, it means that the guiding function of a worldview is not really 'working' anymore. If these discourses are to offer us any guidance, we have to conceive of them as true, not as puzzling and confusing. As the Flemish philosopher Leo Apostel and his collaborators have already understood: this confusion may well be one of the causes of the growing problems of alienation and malaise in Western society (Aerts, Apostel, De Moor, Hellemans, Maex, Van Belle, & Van Der Veken, 1994). The Leo Apostel Centre therefore envisages bridging the gaps that currently divide scientific disciplines, not with the idea of searching for one unifying theory, but to reach a common scientific statement with a necessary degree of veracity: the veracity that reality might, in essence, be manifold, and even contradictory.

As for intercultural polylogue, the starting position we take is very important within this truth-debate about reality. For example, belief in the Newtonian worldview will leave less room for bridging towards another worldview than a post-Newtonian worldview.

To conclude this part, we will repeat the definition of worldview, hoping that what Leo Apostel meant has now become clearer. In putting together the ethical and the knowledge aspects, a worldview, as a map, *explains* why something is considered to be 'good' and 'true' and at the same time *orientates us* towards this good and truth. In daily life, we can rely on this worldview, individually and collectively, to evaluate and act, and to put forward prognoses and visions of the future. A worldview is fundamental for the discourses of a society, and fundamental for its societal structure. Yet, at the same time, this worldview is influenced by societal discourses, which reflect intercultural contacts.

Worldviews and the possible difficulty of intercultural polylogue

In the previous part we elaborated on the first-order and second-order categories through which we comprehend the nature of the societal and physical worlds. We said that most members of a society are usually not really explicitly aware of the existence of such a collectively, interculturally and socially constructed worldview guiding them in relation to ethical and knowledge issues. Rather, they make tacit use of it. In an intercultural polylogue, however, a lack of awareness of the interpretational nature of these fundamental categories might cause confusion and even problems when ethical

or knowledge questions are discussed. All participants in an intercultural encounter, with different ethical and knowledge-epistemological points of view, will deeply but unconsciously take their own categories to be right or true. They may be able to question some of their own cultural manifestations, but only rarely will they be able to distance themselves from their main categories. This inevitably leads to unresolved issues on the agenda and mutual frustrations.

So we can discern opposing forces that make it very difficult to establish a genuine intercultural polylogue. On the one hand, as long as participants insist that their own basic categories are the only right and true ones, no real in-depth encounter will be possible. To bring this about, requires the skill of taking a relativistic stance. On the other hand, if participants do take such a relativistic stance, their own categories will no longer be able to serve as guidance, since they can no longer be conceived (implicitly) as *really* – ontologically – right and true. The difficult question that presents itself is therefore: how can we retain this orientating function and still be able to have a well-founded polylogue? How to combine two apparently incompatible forces? The situation becomes even more complicated once we realise that the relativist position, which is usually only adopted for the ethical guiding part of a worldview, yields a highly intricate outcome when taken to its extremes. It prevents us from taking an ethical stance *at all*. If all the ethical-cultural manifestations of the different cultures are considered equally valid, then there are no standards by which to measure what is ‘good’ and what is ‘wrong’. Without standards – a frame – we cannot judge properly, for we will then no longer have the tools to condemn actions which we very profoundly feel to be ethically unacceptable, such as rape, child prostitution, traffic in human beings. In theory, the only possible outcome of ethical cultural relativism, taken to its extreme, is indifference.

To solve this dilemma, Charles Taylor introduced the idea of Best-Account (BA) principle (Taylor, *ibid* p. 73). Charles Taylor acknowledges that there is no ethical truth, in the sense of an – ontologically ‘real’ external truth. Truth with regard to ethical issues is always a human affair. This, however, does not mean that ethical issues are relative by definition, and that we are left with a jungle that is wholly deprived of any ethics and where everything is permitted. The following example serves to illustrate what Taylor means by the BA principle. Several decades ago, an article was written by a commission that visited Europe and whose members came from various non-Western countries. They sharply pointed out a number of weak points in our system. They commented on our habit of putting people in homes for the aged, and our overemphasis on ‘sight’ in seeking guidance: to them, such elements of our natural environment as parks or flowers offered for sale in shops had the feel of plastic, because they looked nice but had no smell at all and were sterile.

The observations made by this commission really touched a tender spot. One can feel their ethical ‘truth’ resonating deep down inside. This realisation may even trigger a change of one’s ethical position, for instance, because one feels that these remarks testify to a maturity that is ethically superior to one’s own viewpoint, according to which such homes are considered normal. In understanding the position of these non-Western writers, one may undergo a change, feeling that the newly adopted vision is closer to the ‘truth’ than one’s original view.

This is what Taylor calls the BA-principle: a change from one ethical position to another through a new understanding of the inadequacy of the original viewpoint. He

coined it the Best-Account principle, because this account is temporary. The new position can in turn be challenged by another idea that we believe to be better and that touches us. The 'better' nature of this new viewpoint may well be an illusion altogether, but that is precisely why we should keep arguing and face different critics. The purpose is to grow together, interculturally, towards the Best-Account principle.

What implications do Taylor's ideas have for an intercultural polylogue? In general, to us, the success of any intercultural encounter depends on two conditions. Firstly, all participants should have reflected on their own first and second-order categories, so that they can relativise them and question both the categories themselves and their cultural manifestations. Secondly, the participants should be firm enough in their beliefs not to relativise their own categories (and those of others) to the extent that they become indifferent to or totally lose their own beacons. They may – and possibly should – convincingly stand for some of their values, as we explained with regard to Taylor's BA principle. More specifically, intercultural encounters will only have a chance of success if ethical issues are 'discussed' from within lived experiences. We use the word 'discuss' to mean more than just a mental activity. As Taylor very clearly states himself:

"The bad model of practical reasoning, rooted in the epistemological tradition, constantly nudges us towards a mistrust of transition arguments. It wants us to look for 'criteria' to decide the issue, i.e. some considerations which could be established even outside the perspectives in dispute and which would nevertheless be decisive. But there cannot be such considerations. My perspective is defined by the moral intuitions I have, by what I am morally moved by. If I abstract from this, I become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all. You will only convince me by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story."

In closing, we wish to add one more thing. For us, an intercultural polylogue has a goal. It should in the first place profoundly deal with a delineation of self-understanding and our place in this world. Within this context, it should look for universal knowledge. This might sound odd after all we have just said, but by 'universal knowledge' we refer to its meaning within the context of the Best-Account principle. We will clarify this.

As we said before with regard to rationality, we think that most cultures will acknowledge rationality as an important category, in the sense of a reflective capacity with which to understand ourselves as humans. This recognition can now indeed have universal pretensions since the delineation is not the result of one cultural knowledge system which auto-determines its knowledge as universal, but the outcome of an in-depth and extensive process of intercultural deliberations. The knowledge about rationality is not true – in the ontological sense – because it does not re-present aspects of the world, but it is nevertheless true at a socially constructed level, where it may have this paradoxical universally constructed status.

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