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# The Boundaries of Intercultural Dialogue in a World “After Babel”

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the inescapable boundaries of intercultural dialogue in a context of (radical) religious and societal heterogeneity, in which there is no common language. The paper discusses two models of understanding the cultural other: first, Gadamer’s idea of a fusion of horizons, and second, Ricoeur’s idea of cultural hospitality. Through a critical analysis of Taylor’s ideas of understanding the other in her own right, it is shown that the paradigm of a fusion of horizons is only effective for intercultural dialogue as long as the differences between various cultures are not too big. However, this paradigm reaches its boundaries in a context of cultural heterogeneity, because there is no “Esperanto”, i.e. a common language, in which all the ideas, practices and sensitivities of all cultures could be translated without loss. Therefore, Ricoeur’s idea to approach the opportunities and boundaries of understanding the cultural other by comparing it with learning a different language is a major step forward, since he stresses the value of cultural hospitality, while at the same time doing justice to the idea that there will always be something untranslatable. The conclusion will be that, although intercultural dialogue confronts humans with inescapable boundaries, communication with and understanding of the cultural other are nevertheless essential, since humans can only understand themselves through the other.

**Key Terms:** After Babel, Cultural Hospitality, Fusion of Horizons, Gadamer (Hans Georg), Hermeneutics, Ricoeur (Paul), Taylor (Charles), Translation

## 1. Introduction

In order to get a first impression of the complexities of intercultural dialogue the film “Lost in Translation” is well suited, since it not only confronts us with the inevitable loss of meaning when translating a conversation into or from an unfamiliar language, but also with the inescapable boundaries of understanding the cultural other.<sup>1</sup> The film shows two Americans, who are in Tokyo for professional reasons. In the course of their stay, they feel more and more “lost in translation”, not only because the meaning and detail of what is said is lost in the translation from Japanese into English and vice versa, but also because they feel lost in Japanese culture, which is completely alien to them. Finally yet importantly, although the native language of the two main characters is the same, they also feel lost in their communication with each other because of their differences in age and life-style. Thus, the film confronts us with a paradox: translating and understanding the linguistic or cultural other is essential to communicate with each other. Yet at the same time, perfect translation and complete understanding are impossible, because of the unbridgeable gap that separates us from the linguistic and cultural other. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Sofia Coppola’s film *Lost in Translation*, released in 2003, tells the story of Bob, an aging American movie star, arriving in Tokyo to film an advertisement for whisky. Charlotte, a young college graduate, is left in her hotel room by her husband, a celebrity photographer on assignment in Tokyo. She is unsure of her future with her husband, feeling detached from his lifestyle and dispassionate about their relationship. Bob’s own 25-year marriage is tired as he goes through a midlife crisis. Each day Bob and Charlotte encounter each other in the hotel, and finally meet at the hotel bar one night when neither can sleep. Eventually Charlotte invites Bob to meet with some local friends of hers. The two bond through a memorable night in Tokyo, welcomed without prejudice by Charlotte’s friends and experiencing Japanese nightlife and culture. In the days that follow, Bob and Charlotte’s platonic relationship develops as they spend more time together. One night, each unable to sleep, the two share an intimate conversation about Charlotte’s personal troubles and Bob’s married life. On the penultimate night of his stay, Bob sleeps with the hotel bar’s female jazz singer. The next morning Charlotte arrives at his room to invite him for lunch and overhears the woman in his room, leading to an argument over lunch. Later that night, during a fire alarm at the hotel, Bob and Charlotte reconcile and express how they will miss each other as they make a final visit to the hotel bar. The following morning, Bob is set to return to the United States. He tells Charlotte goodbye at the hotel lobby and watches her walk back to the elevator. In a taxi to the airport, Bob sees Charlotte on a crowded street. He gets out, embraces the tearful Charlotte and whispers something in her ear. The two share a kiss, say goodbye and Bob departs.

everyone knows that there *is* translation and understanding of the other: although we live in a world characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity, in a world “after Babel” so to say, we never give up trying to find our way in the labyrinth of words and meanings, however deficient and clumsy the result of our translations and understanding turns out to be. Moreover, these attempts go far beyond purely pragmatic needs, thus showing how essential communicating with and understanding of the other is for human existence.

These observations take us to the leading question of this paper: Is it possible to understand the cultural other in her own right, which is generally taken to be an essential condition for a fair intercultural dialogue? The (philosophical) answer to this question starts with a critical discussion of Charles Taylor’s views about understanding the cultural other, which are an application of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical method, in particular the fusion of horizons, to intercultural dialogue. The section thereafter explores whether the application of Paul Ricoeur’s idea of linguistic hospitality to the cultural sphere offers a better approach to the understanding of the cultural other, as it acknowledges the inescapable boundaries of intercultural dialogue. Ricoeur’s analysis helps us to get a better insight into the importance of intercultural dialogue for our own self-understanding, but also confronts us with the inescapable boundaries of such a dialogue, since it always takes place in a world “after Babel”.

## 2. Taylor’s hermeneutical approach of intercultural dialogue

According to Charles Taylor, “the great challenge of this century, both for politics and social science, is that of understanding the other as such. The days are long gone when European and other Westerners could consider their experience and culture as the norm toward which the whole of humanity was headed, so that the other could be understood as an earlier stage on the same road that they had trodden.”<sup>2</sup> To put it in more general terms, there is always an ethnocentric temptation to make too quick sense of the other, that is, make sense of her in one’s own terms. Therefore, we need to understand how we can move

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, “Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes,” in Idem, *Dilemmas and Connections. Selected Essays* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2011), p.24.

from making the best sense of the other in our initial terms, which she will usually experience as an alien imposition, to making the best sense of her on her own terms. According to Taylor, such a move will be impossible “without allowing into our ontology something like alternative horizons or conceptual schemes.”<sup>3</sup> Methodologically, he develops his views by applying Gadamer’s account of the challenge by the cultural other to the understanding of quite alien societies. The aim thereby is that we resist the temptation to integrate the cultural other into our identity; instead, we should accept the challenge that the former poses to the latter, thus confronting us with different and often disconcerting ways of being human. “The challenge is to be able to acknowledge the humanity of their way, while still being able to live ours.”<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that such an approach would seriously enhance the quality of intercultural dialogue, in particular its fair and unbiased character.

In order to realize this approach, a first condition is that the understanding of the cultural other needs to be clearly distinguished from the knowledge of objects. Whereas our knowledge of things is basically unilateral, our understanding of the other is a bilateral process. It is not only a matter of talking and imposing my conceptual schemes on the other, but also of listening to what the other has to say and accepting her (possible) critique of the adequacy of my conceptual schemes to understand her. Furthermore, whereas our knowledge of objects is in principle stable, all our understandings of the other person are subject to change in the sense that, when her life situation and goals change, our initial understanding of her is put into question. Finally, whereas our knowledge of things is aimed at attaining a full intellectual control over the object, this cannot be the goal of my understanding of the other person, since she would reject such an understanding as a (hidden) kind of manipulation and as quite the opposite of an understanding of her on her own terms.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to understanding the *cultural* other in her own right the requirement that this process is indeed bilateral becomes even more pressing, since our understanding of her spontaneously takes place against the background of our own cultural outlook and its inherent prejudices. Since we often are not even aware of them, we need the challenges

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.25f.

and interpellations of the cultural other to identify and explicate the essentials of our implicit outlook step by step. This results in a shift of our self-understanding and our understanding of the cultural other, which makes it easier for us to understand her in her own right. In other words, only then “we will see our own peculiarity for the first time, as a formulated fact about us and not simply a taken-for-granted feature of the human condition as such; and at the same time, we will perceive the corresponding feature of their life-form undistorted.”<sup>6</sup> Obviously, because of the complexity of understanding a different culture and the persistency of our prejudices, this shift is not a one-off event, but an ongoing process. In sum, my understanding of the cultural other is party-dependent in a double way: it varies not only with the object studied (i.e. the cultural other), but also with me as the culturally embedded subject who studies it. Therefore, in order to avoid that the negative consequences of these party-dependencies get the upper hand a shift in our self-understanding and our understanding of the other is needed, as well as a willingness to accept the challenge and interpellation of the cultural other.

In spite of all this, the language, in which I understand the cultural other will inevitably differ from the words with which she describes herself, and will be different as well from the language in which a third party understands her. Thus, in order to prevent that the co-existence of these languages ends up in a cacophony of voices that would obstruct every understanding of the cultural other, the different speakers have to make a shift towards a language that bridges those of all parties involved in this process of (mutual) understanding. This is what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons”: “The ‘horizons’ here are at first distinct, they are the way that each has of understanding the human condition in their non-identity. The ‘fusion’ comes about when one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended so as to make room for the object that before did not fit within it.”<sup>7</sup> So, in order to arrive at mutual understanding, what is needed is a “richer language”, in which all parties involved can agree to talk undistortively of each other. The criterion of “undistortiveness” allows for a critique of all kinds of ethnocentric understandings of the cultural other, thus avoiding that the co-existence of multiple cultural horizons of understanding results in sheer relativism. Thus, the ideal way to understand the cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.30.

other on her own terms consists in giving the most comprehensive account, allowing as many alternative horizons or conceptual schemes as possible into our ontology, so that as many human beings as possible can understand each other and come to undistorted understandings.

Fundamentally, the dynamics of this kind of fusion of horizons presupposes that we share the same humaneness, so that the (cultural) other is not completely alien or incommensurable to us. As long as this communality situates on the abstract level of a shared humaneness or, in a political context, human dignity, it will not give rise to many objections, but when it comes to giving a specific, culturally embedded interpretation of this common ground things become far more difficult. In order to illustrate the complexity of this problem, Taylor confronts two very different cultural practices, namely the Roman Catholic mass and the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, and examines if and how they relate to a shared humaneness. In this case, “a good starting point for an eventual fusion of horizons involves identifying what something in the puzzling life of an alien people can usefully be contrasted with in ours. [...] What we are doing is identifying that facet of our lives which their strange customs interpellate, challenge, offer a notional alternative to.”<sup>8</sup> In this specific case, the fusion of horizons ultimately rests on the idea that the Aztec sacrifice as well as the Roman Catholic mass are practical ways to express how people deal with the human condition. Yet, Taylor admits that we have no stable, culture-transcendent name for these rival construals of a dimension of the human condition.<sup>9</sup> In the Catholic tradition, the interpretative names of this ritual are guilt, sacrifice, and redemption, but we have no idea which names the Aztecs use for it and even less how they correspond with the Catholic ones.

Taylor thinks that this situation of cultural and religious heterogeneity points to the need to change our self-understanding, to make an identity shift in us. The crucial moment in this process is that we allow ourselves to be interpellated by the other, and refrain from categorizing “difference” as an “error”, a fault or a lesser, undeveloped version. In other words, our task is to take the stance of a fundamental openness towards the cultural other, even if she cannot be integrated into our identity, but rather challenges it. Although Taylor

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.36.

recognizes that these changes imply a painful “identity cost” and that the cultural other confronts us with disconcerting ways of being human, he is convinced that we are also enriched by knowing what other possibilities there are in our world.<sup>10</sup>

The merits of Taylor’s analysis of understanding the cultural other are evident. He convincingly argues that the most important challenge for such an understanding consists in interpreting the other on her own terms. This implies that not I, but the other is the final criterion for a correct intercultural understanding. Furthermore, Taylor points out how easily our understanding of the other can become biased, even against our own conscious intentions. Finally, Taylor deserves to be commended for acknowledging the “identity-cost” that a true understanding of the cultural other involves, as well as for recognizing how difficult it is to find a common ground or a culture-transcendent vocabulary, especially when it comes to the understanding of the practices of the cultural other, rather than her theoretical arguments. In sum, he shows that intercultural dialogue is more often than not the opposite of a cozy chat between like-minded people; rather, in my attempt to understand the other on her own terms my cultural identity is at stake, and this explains why such a dialogue sometimes is a painful experience.

Yet, in spite of all these merits, I think that Taylor’s idea to consider the fusion of horizons as the epistemological foundation for the understanding of the cultural other and as a condition for intercultural dialogue raises some serious problems. First, this idea grossly overestimates the real possibility of a (conceptual) fusion of cultural horizons. The above example of the gap that separates the horizon needed to understand the Roman Catholic mass, versus the one that makes it possible for the Aztecs to understand their practice of human sacrifice illustrates how difficult it is to comply with the high standard for a real fusion of horizons. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the fusion of cultural horizons is practically impossible to achieve when the distance between them is too big; there simply is no culture-transcendent vocabulary for an unbiased intercultural understanding. As long as there is a reasonable degree of communality between my horizon and that of the other, their fusion is certainly possible and potentially enriching, since it enables me to see myself and the cultural other from a different perspective. In other words, when understanding the other in her own right involves the pain of identity loss, this is

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.36f.

largely compensated by the gain of an intellectually and morally more appropriate view of the cultural other. However, when conceptual and religious schemes differ too much, our capacity to understand the cultural other in her own right arrives at an impasse. When this is the case, the cultural other does not challenge or interpellate my cultural identity any more, but appears as an alien, whose cultural practice I find repulsive and not at all an alternative concretization of being human. As said, this problem becomes especially acute when one is confronted with concrete cultural practices rather than with abstract principles or opinions. In the example of the fusion of horizons between the Roman Catholic mass and the Aztec human sacrifice, Taylor admits that he has no idea what a stable, culture-transcendent name for these rival construals could be. Anyway, the category “being human” is too abstract to fulfill this mediating role. Yet, a specific transcultural category is a minimal condition for a fusion of horizons, and hence for an understanding of the cultural other in her own right. Therefore, Taylor’s appeal to change our self-understanding for a proper understanding of the cultural other risks to remain a vacuous demand in those cases where it is needed most, namely in the case of a dialogue about substantial cultural differences.

The background of this problem is that Gadamer’s idea of a fusion of horizons stems from his work on the interpretation of classic texts and works of art in different spatio-temporal situations. In the case of biblical exegesis, the Bible serves as the primary, stable point of reference for every interpretation. This focal point does not only make a fusion of interpretational horizons possible, but also enables the reader to decide, in principle, whether an interpretation is loyal to the original text, and to distinguish such an interpretation from a distorted or biased one. This shows that hermeneutics in general and the idea of a fusion of horizons in particular rest on the belief that the universe of textual interpretation and understanding is a homogeneous one, referring to a given (body of) text(s), so that different interpretations can be seen as complementing each other. Yet, although hermeneutics has enormous merits as an underlying theory of the interpretation of (classic) texts and works of art, its application to the understanding of the cultural other causes insurmountable problems, since there is no such thing as a stable, trans-cultural point of reference. Especially because the societal and religious landscape has become so heterogeneous in our times, there is rather dissemination and deferral of meaning than complementary understanding and fusion of horizons. This makes it (almost) impossible

to understand the cultural other in her own right, let alone to decide whether this is indeed the case.

The previous problem points to another, more fundamental one. Ignoring that the gap between different interpretational horizons can be too big to bridge can result in inadvertently understanding the cultural other from one’s own perspective, thus failing to understand her on her own terms. The basic problem is that, if a minimal communality between the interpretational horizons of the (religious) other and me is lacking, I can never know whether my understanding of her is not a distorted appropriation in disguise. The possibly appropriative character of my understanding of the other can only be corrected if she has a minimal understanding of my interpretation of her, and reversely the other’s critical feedback on my interpretation only makes sense if I understand what she is talking about at all. Moreover, there is no external body or instance that could judge whether or not my understanding of her is distorted. Although one can argue again that there is a fundamental communality on the very abstract level of humaneness, this common ground is too abstract to correct concrete instances of distorted understandings between people with very different conceptual and cultural schemes.

Finally, the above problems become even thornier when we try to understand a different culture as a whole. So far we have been discussing the understanding of the concrete, personal cultural other. In such a dialogical situation, it seems indeed reasonable to rely on her critical interpellations and challenges in order to correct my distorted understanding of her, as well as on my intellectual and moral capacities to see things from a broader perspective than my own. However, it is highly questionable whether this dialogical model can be extended to the understanding of an entire culture and mode of being. As is common knowledge, many people in contemporary Western societies find it extremely difficult to have a (public) debate with cultural minorities within those societies, let alone to pursue it along the dialogical lines of fair interpellations and challenges. This should make us suspicious to extend this model to a global level. This shows that the traditional model of an intercultural dialogue, which is based on the fusion of horizons, actually rests on a more or less homogeneous universe of discourse with stable and identifiable points of reference, which serve as its common ground. Yet, in a globalized cultural world, which is marked by a pervasive heterogeneity, these presuppositions cannot

anymore be taken for granted.

In sum, the above critical remarks on the application of the Gadamerian idea of a fusion of horizons to the field of intercultural dialogue explain why many people, in spite of their good intentions, often experience these dialogues as frustrating. These experiences show that the most influential traditional paradigm of intercultural dialogue, namely the fusion of cultural horizons, reaches its boundaries when the dialogue partners have little in common. This is because this paradigm rests on the erroneous assumption that the intercultural landscape is a homogeneous one, in particular that the common ground of a shared humaneness is sufficient to bridge the gap between very different cultural practices. Furthermore, the proposal to see the fusion of horizons as a viable way to understand the cultural other on her own terms is problematic, because it can easily lead to a cultural appropriation in disguise.

### 3. Understanding the cultural other in a world “after Babel”<sup>11</sup>

The most important element that distinguishes Paul Ricoeur’s views on intercultural dialogue from those of Taylor is that he considers the universe of discourse, in which this dialogue often takes place, as a heterogeneous one, thereby avoiding the problems of the fusion of horizons. Ricoeur acknowledges that there is an unbridgeable gap between my and the other’s linguistic horizon, as the expression “after Babel” indicates. Although Ricoeur focuses primarily on translation, his analysis also offers a very valuable approach for the understanding of the cultural other, since to understand is to translate.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the intellectual and ethical challenges and opportunities to translation in a situation of linguistic heterogeneity are quite similar to those that arise when we try to understand the cultural other.

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<sup>11</sup> I discussed Ricoeur’s ideas about translation and the connection to the understanding of the (religious) other in more detail in: Peter Jonkers, “A Critical Understanding of the Religious Other” (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, translated by Eileen Brennan, with an introduction by Richard Kearney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.72. For an excellent introduction to Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation see: Richard Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation,” *Research in Phenomenology* 37(2007): 147-159.

As far as the process of translation is concerned, Ricoeur catches its opportunities and challenges with the term “linguistic hospitality”: it carries the double duty “to expropriate oneself from oneself as one appropriates the other to oneself.”<sup>13</sup> Fulfilling this duty offers a pragmatic way out of the ruinous alternative of complete untranslatability versus perfect translatability. Applying these ideas to the cultural domain helps us to reduce our aims regarding the understanding of the cultural other, in particular to replace “intercultural dialogue” by the less ambitious expression “understanding the cultural other in a world after Babel”. So, in order to qualify as a step forward, Ricoeur’s approach should help us to overcome the problems of the fusion of horizons and its underlying assumption of cultural homogeneity, yet without lapsing into the opposite extreme, namely cultural incommensurability, because this would make every attempt to understand the cultural other pointless on beforehand. As will be shown in more detail below, the term “cultural hospitality”, being a transferal of linguistic hospitality to the cultural domain, aptly catches the intended outcome of this dynamic.

Let us start with examining Ricoeur’s views on translation, and then see how they can be made fruitful for the understanding of the cultural other. First, the need for translation is a direct consequence of the fact that, while the capacity to speak a language is universal among humans, it actually only exists through a multiplicity of languages. Plurality and dissemination belong to the human condition, and linguistic plurality is one of its shapes. In this case, the need for translation follows from our social nature: it is an attempt to prevent this plurality from turning into complete incommensurability, since this would result in the bitter fate of confining ourselves to the linguistic world with which we are familiar. Phrased positively this means that, although all of us speak a specific mother tongue, we want to learn foreign languages in order to make ourselves acquainted with other perspectives, both on ourselves and the world, and this for more than purely practical reasons. In other words, because we discover ourselves and the world through the other, we need translation.

Yet at the same time, the insight that we live in a time “after Babel” implies the acknowledgement of the boundaries of translation.<sup>14</sup> Every language has a different way

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation,” 150f.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, pp.3-5, 8.

of carving things up phonetically, based on phonological systems, conceptually, based on lexical systems, and syntactically, based on different grammars. Consequently, there is no consensus at each of these levels, let alone at all of them, about what would characterize a perfect language that could legitimately claim universality. Moreover, no one can tell whether the specific languages, with all their linguistic peculiarities, are or even can be derived from a presumably original language. In other words, there is no pre-Babylonian, paradisiac language underlying all the specific languages, which could serve as a stable point of reference and a criterion for a good translation and as a focal point of their complementarity. This implies that every language is prone to mistranslation by a non-native speaker.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, within the same linguistic community, each word is marked by polysemy, has more than one meaning. In order to find the “right” meaning, we have to take into account the meaning that a word takes on in a sentence, and in the wider context of a discourse, both patent and hidden, intellectual and emotional. A sentence introduces a further degree of polysemy, related to the world as the referent of the sentence. A final level of polysemy occurs on the level of the narrative, referring to the fact that it is always possible to say the same thing in a different way.

These insights into the fundamental heterogeneity of languages lead to the conclusion that “we can only aim at a supposed equivalence, not founded on a demonstrable identity of meaning.”<sup>16</sup> This equivalence without identity calls for multiple translations and retranslations, which can be compared with each other, but not with a hypothetical original language that would guarantee the identity of meaning. In other words, we have to acknowledge that there will always be something untranslatable, just like there is no standard of a correct translation. The result is that “we can translate differently, without hope of filling the gap between equivalence and adequacy,”<sup>17</sup> i.e. complete correspondence. By accepting translations of our native language, we expropriate ourselves from ourselves, i.e. we give up our longing for linguistic self-sufficiency; but we also appropriate the other to ourselves, since she makes us aware of the specific expressive possibilities and idiosyncrasies that our native language offers. Similarly, we become familiar with the possibilities and idiosyncrasies of other languages, thus expanding our linguistic horizon.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.15-18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

This explains why there is a desire to translate, which goes beyond constraint and utility. It enables us to prevent the bitter fate of enclosing ourselves in a monologue. This situation comes down to a call for linguistic hospitality, “where the pleasure of dwelling in the other’s language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one’s own welcoming house.”<sup>18</sup>

To what extent can Ricoeur’s insights on linguistic translation help us in our understanding of the cultural other, and offer a solution for the problems of Taylor’s views on this matter? Does it make sense to replace the expression “intercultural dialogue” by “cultural hospitality” and the underlying paradigm of a “fusion of cultural horizons” by the far more modest one that every understanding of the cultural other takes place in a world after Babel? Let us develop a bit further the correspondence between linguistic translation and the understanding of the cultural other, which was already hinted at in the catchphrase “to understand is to translate.”<sup>19</sup>

Before examining how Ricoeur’s insights on understanding the cultural other can be seen as a solution to the problematic aspects of Taylor’s views, it makes sense to start with highlighting a fundamental agreement between these two authors. Their common hermeneutic approach of our understanding of ourselves, the world, and the other implies that both reject the self-sufficiency of the subject and the separation between an active, knowing subject and a passive, known object, thereby criticizing the legacy of modern, in particular Cartesian philosophy. Just as, for Taylor, understanding the cultural other requires that I allow the other to challenge and change me in my (self-)understanding, so Ricoeur defines understanding as a process, in which I am willing to expropriate myself from myself as I appropriate the other to myself. If anything, this practice is essential to prevent the lure of interpretative omnipotence, of understanding the other by one’s own standards.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, whereas for Taylor, this approach is inspired by the ideal of a fusion of horizons and an understanding of the cultural other on her own terms, Ricoeur is convinced that the distance between my horizon of understanding and that of the cultural other cannot be

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.10; see also pp.26-29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Kearney, “Introduction: Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Translation,” in Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, pp.xvif.

bridged. Hence, not only translating the other's linguistic expressions, but also understanding her takes place in a world after Babel, a world of cultural heterogeneity. This precludes the return to a hypothetical, pre-Babylonian situation of cultural complementarity, which would ensure the undistorted character of intercultural dialogue, and guarantee the understanding of the cultural other on her own terms. In other words, the dissemination of horizons of understanding belongs to the human condition just as fundamentally as linguistic dissemination. We simply have to accept that there always will be something incomprehensible in our understanding of the cultural other, just like there will always be something untranslatable.

In comparison to Taylor, Ricoeur is far more aware of the fundamental heterogeneity of all horizons of understanding. This means that we cannot realize the ideal of an undistorted understanding of the cultural other, but have to content ourselves with a lot of equivalent understandings. Moreover, since the only thing we can achieve is an equivalence between the various understandings of the cultural other, but not a demonstrable identity of meaning, there is no fixed standard against which we could "measure" whether our understanding of the cultural other, let alone of a different culture as a whole is undistorted. The cultural other's challenges and criticisms of my understanding of her are certainly vital to minimize the risk of distortion. Yet because a fusion of our horizons of understanding is impossible, even asymptotically, I cannot know whether my understanding of her is actually unbiased, and this for the same reason as she cannot know whether she understands my understanding of her correctly. In other words, for the same reasons as that there is no language that could serve as a standard for a perfect translation, there is no understanding of the cultural other that would a priori be protected against distortion. Taylor's remark about the lack of a stable point of reference in the understanding of the Catholic mass versus the Aztec practice of human sacrifice illustrates the point I want to make in this respect quite well. Moreover, similar experiences of unbridgeable cultural heterogeneity are common to everyone who has been engaged in understanding the cultural other (on her own terms).

Yet, just as learning other languages expands our linguistic horizon, so that the loss of linguistic self-sufficiency can be compensated by the awareness of the possibilities and idiosyncrasies of our own language and that of the linguistic other, so does understanding the cultural other enrich our awareness of our own and other cultures, thus preventing the

deadlock of cultural self-enclosure. Far more fundamental than just an intellectual and cultural challenge, it is existentially vital for us to expand our cultural horizon, because we discover ourselves through the other. The term cultural hospitality aptly expresses this attitude and the value behind it. In other words, just as speaking a specific mother tongue does not prevent us from appreciating the importance to learn other languages, so does the fact that we understand ourselves and the world primarily from our own perspective not invalidate the relevance to familiarize ourselves with other perspectives, both on ourselves and the world.

Cultural hospitality is the appropriate term to catch the importance of understanding the cultural other. This term points to the fruits of adopting a fundamentally positive attitude towards the cultural other, although it will never result in an understanding of the cultural other in her own right because of the inevitable heterogeneity of cultural belonging and the fragmentation of human understanding. Just because a fusion of cultural horizons is impossible, we can only aim at an attitude of cultural hospitality, which enables us to understand the cultural other and ourselves from multiple perspectives, but without cherishing the hope of an adequate understanding of her cultural idiosyncrasies. In other words, in a situation of cultural heterogeneity, there is a desire to understand and to explain, which goes beyond constraint and utility.

Cultural hospitality means to acknowledge that, since understanding the other is a work of mediation between one perspective and another, it is inevitably caught up in a double bind. Understanding the cultural other is only possible because of a vow of faithfulness to oneself and the other, but it is also under the suspicion of betraying these vows. In both cases, the basic problem is that, by engaging ourselves in an understanding of the cultural other, we have already given up the illusion of an immediate access to and a complete understanding of her. Hence, engaging in the understanding of the cultural other means that one constantly has to serve two masters: our own identity and integrity and that of the other. If the conviction of betrayal gets the upper hand, this leads to the acknowledgement of the impossibility of and even a resistance against every understanding, because it is experienced as a threat to the original identity of myself and the other. Understanding then appears either as an assimilation of the other by myself, or as an alienation from myself by the other. If faithfulness takes the shape of an immediate

access to oneself and the other, this leads to the unsubstantiated claim that the plurality of cultures is nothing more than greater or smaller varieties in a homogeneous universe of discourse, so that the *real* (cultural) other eventually disappears behind the hermeneutic horizon.

## 4. Conclusion

The above analyses of Taylor's and Ricoeur's ideas on intercultural dialogue show, first of all, that understanding the cultural other is a risky practice, always in danger of assimilating that what cannot and should not be assimilated into our own world. There is no complete and undistorted understanding of what is foreign to us that could serve as an objective criterion for our practice of understanding. Moreover, we realize that there is always something that eludes our understanding and that is thus incommunicable. Hence, "we can only aim at a supposed equivalence, not founded on a demonstrable identity of meaning."<sup>21</sup> This aim at equivalence is concretized by the fact that the practice of understanding the cultural other consists in comparing our understandings with those of others. The result is that "we can understand differently, without hope of filling the gap between equivalence and adequacy."<sup>22</sup> In my view, this underpins the proposal to replace the overambitious idea of intercultural dialogue and fusion of cultural horizons with the more modest suggestion of cultural hospitality in a world after Babel. This answer makes us aware of the fact that understanding the cultural other has to live with the possibility of faithfulness and betrayal.

Yet, this awareness should not deter us from the attempt to understand the cultural other, even when, as in the example of the Roman Catholic mass versus the Aztec human sacrifice, this understanding seems to be impossible. First of all, an imperfect understanding is preferable to no understanding at all. This is why cultural hospitality gives us a real pleasure. Furthermore, only by accepting the test of the foreign, in other words thanks to cultural hospitality, we become sensitive to the strangeness of our own culture,

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, p.33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

ideas, and practices. Thanks to cultural hospitality we get a better understanding of ourselves, since the culture of the other is necessary for this. By staying in the space, with which we are familiar and in which we feel at home, we certainly will not feel lost in translation, but such an attitude inevitably leads to self-sufficiency and self-enclosure. Finally, understanding the cultural other brings forth a creative encounter between two worlds and makes meaning move. It develops new semantic resonances, makes unexpected allusions, and points to surprising new possibilities. In sum, the idea of cultural hospitality helps us to find our way in our own and the cultural other’s labyrinth of meanings.

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## 「在巴別塔之後」的世界裡面臨的跨文化對話的界限

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**內容摘要：**本文乃是審視在（激進）宗教與社會異質性——在這種異質性之中不存在共同語言——的脈絡下，跨文化對話所必然遭遇的界限。本文討論瞭解文化他者的兩種模式：第一，高達美的視域融合；第二，呂格爾的文化好客性的概念。透過泰勒所謂的「瞭解他者本身」觀念之批判性分析，顯示視域融合的典範要能夠促進跨文化對話，其先決條件是不同文化之間的差異不是太大。不過，在文化異質的脈絡裡，這種典範有其侷限，原因在於少了可以完整翻譯各個文化所有觀念、習俗和敏感性的共同語言。因此，呂格爾把瞭解文化他者比喻為學習另一種語言，用這個角度來面對在理解他者時所遇到的機會和侷限，確實是一大進步，因為他一方面強調了文化好客性的價值，同時也考量到了在不同的文化之間，總有些東西是無法翻譯的。本文的結論是，跨文化對話儘管免不了要面對人類及其必然的侷限，對文化他者的溝通和理解卻仍然是必要的，因為人類唯有透過他者，才能瞭解自己。

**關鍵詞：**巴別塔之後、視域融合、高達美、詮釋學、呂格爾、泰勒、翻譯