

Roots of Recognition - Cultural Identity and the Ethos of Hermeneutic Dialogue

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At stake is a theory of intercultural understanding and communication (*interkulturelle Verständigung*). Such a theory is part of a general theory of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*). The goal of interpretive theory, broadly construed, is to show how the *understanding of cognitive content* is possible through interpretation, i.e. how epistemic access to an object that is supposedly 'meaningful' is to be achieved. As such, it is essentially a normative discipline, and it is so in at least two aspects. In a narrower epistemic sense, the objective is that the interpretation gives us an adequate or true account of what is to be understood. Yet in a broader intersubjective sense, interpretation is normative since it requires us to get to the understanding that is expressed in the other symbolic context. In other words, getting it right about the meaning always involves an *interpretive recognition of the self-understanding of the other agents*.

However, because the understanding of the other's self-understanding is necessarily *our* understanding, the task is to show how an interpreter situated or grounded in a particular culture is capable of bridging the difference between her own self-understanding about something so as to gain access to the meaning and self-understanding of another. And since such a process will necessarily involve communicating with the other about something, we have to show how communication has to be structured such that an understanding of the other's meaning is possible.

Making communication central to understanding another cultural agent will involve three claims. First, the two senses of normativity, i.e. getting it right about the meaning *and* recognizing the self-understanding of the other, are inextricably intertwined. One cannot understand another unless one is oriented at the other's self-understanding. Interpretive truth or rightness is possible only by recognizing (in the sense of capturing or knowing) the other's intentions, and that means that one understands the other only if one takes into account the self-understanding of the other. As this is done from one's own background, we are talking here about an idealized form of interpretive orientation in communication; the construction of the other's self-understanding will prove to be a complex and mediated process be-

tween one's own and the other's concepts and practices, within which one's own and the other's self-understanding get articulated as (more or less) distinct discursive positions.¹

Second, the desiderata of interpretive theory can and must be met by analyzing the interpreter's competences. It is not enough to develop a theory of the basic normative requirements of interpretation. Rather, it is necessary to show how those normative orientations can be realized. As they will have to be actualized by situated interpreters, we have to show how those socially situated agents have the potential to unleash the desired interpretive process. What we thus need to discuss is which interpretive capabilities are normatively desirable and how they can be realized by social subjects.

Finally, we claim that such a theory of interpretive competences will emerge through a reconstruction of the cultural constitution of self-identity, thereby providing what we could call the hermeneutic roots of recognition. By reconstructing the social sources of identity-formation that constitute an individual self, we similarly approach the capabilities that can ground intercultural understanding and communication.

The basic project is this: Selves are shown to be dialogical identities, which means that they are (a) essentially shaped by the recognition of other agents, with whom they are engaged in social interaction in mutually shared cultural contexts, and (b) agents are essentially open, internally diverse, and never fully accomplished structures, which follows from the derivation of their identity from dialogical processes of perspective-taking. This model avoids the assumption of a self dependent on fully determined cultural contexts. Selves are instead internally perspectival, multiply-shaped centers of meaning and agency. At the same time, other cultures cease to be holistically closed and impenetrable meaning blocks, since they themselves are constituted by symbolically mediated perspectives and assumptions. While also realized in bodily schemes and social institutions, it is largely the symbolic mediation that defines the agents' cultural identity. Intercultural understanding and communication (*interkulturelle Ver-*

¹ Such an idealized methodological orientation is far from empty or powerless. It forces the interpreter to reconstruct in most depth and detail the cultural contexts that underlie the other's meaningful expressions, and as such prevents any simplistic imposition of ethnocentric schemes and assumptions. The internal epistemic normativity with regard to truthful understanding thus involves an important ethical-political consequence, as it entails the need to ground any interpretation of the other in an analysis of her underlying symbolic and practical contexts.

ständigung) is thus not well conceived as bridging a gap from one culture-bound self to another, where cultures would be self-centered contexts of meaning, but should rather be seen as the always partial, always possible, yet always culturally situated process of addressing and recognizing other perspectives in relation to those that define one's own meaningful background.²

1. The Dialogical Formation of Self-Identity

The basic intuition behind a social theory of identity formation is that the structure that essentially defines the self can best be reconstructed by looking at social processes, in particular at the dialogical perspective-taking that emerges at a crucial point in human social interaction.³ An essential aspect of self-identity is that there is a consciousness of self that distinguishes itself as a self, i.e. knows itself as a distinct kind of being, and yet knows itself to be identical with itself, i.e. is sure of itself as self. What is required here is the capacity to reflexively objectify oneself, and yet to remain cognizant that it is oneself that is engaged in this process. Yet how

² The German term *Verständigung* cannot easily be rendered with one word in English. *Verständigung* ties together the two ideas that (a) to understand someone, you have to communicate with the other so as to understand what she or he believes, and (b) communication itself must be oriented at perceiving and comprehending the issues from the other's point of view. Some might say that *Verständigung* entails (c) the additional connotation that communication might also (or even always) aim at reaching consensus. However, *Verständigung* can also end up with a consensus about a substantive disagreement about something, while this disagreement must itself be based on an understanding of the different perspectives involved. It is this more basic connection between interpretation and communication which is important for us here, suggesting that *both points of view* have to be fully considered and integrated into the final understanding of meaning. The motto is: No full understanding without communication, and no real communication without grasping the other's concrete perspective about something!

³ The claim that social conditions are necessary for self-development might be contested, as a social reconstruction will always be limited to showing that given certain social conditions, the production of certain subjective cognitive attitudes and competences plausibly follows. This leaves room for the pre-existence of those subjective capacities, be it in a transcendental, metaphysical, or otherwise ontologically pre-given self. But if we exclude the *dogmatic positing of the structure of self-consciousness*, we must then show how self-identity emerges from an empirical source—and here social interaction proves most fruitful.

can the self address itself as a distinct self, and yet remain sure of its identity?

A plausible answer is that the structure of social interaction involves the experience of another as a distinct entity, and that the related social capacity of perspective-taking enables the self to take the attitude of another toward itself. With regard to the social development of human agents, one can first distinguish a phase in which the newborn interacts on a pre-objectifying level with the environment: its own desires and 'intentions' are a mass of immediate impulses and 'experiences' as much as the stimuli or events coming from the environment are taken in to satisfy basic needs including food, warmth, sleep etc. Out of the unarticulated mass of perceptions, basic processes of imitation emerge, as well as early patterns of recognition with regard to features and structures of the environment. The sensory organs such as eyes and hands become more and more capable of fixating objects, of identifying certain objects as the same, and of expressing positive or negative responses directly in response to such identified objects (Gehlen 1988; Kögler 2006).

However, it is crucial that the object- or event-identification always takes place in an interactive context in which human subjects either directly represent the objects that are identified (such as the faces of mother, father, and other close subjects) or else are crucial in representing additional things (such as milk bottles, toys, or clothes). Central stage thus takes the human-interactive process. Here, basic pattern of imitation emerge, but more importantly is the cooperative process in which even in the earliest stages the infant and the adult begin to adjust their actions to a set of repeated actions and processes. What takes place here is prior even to what Mead called the conversation of gestures, because actions are here adjusted to one another without taking on an expressive nature. Later on emerges a real communication of gestures, which takes place when the expressive feature of one organism is taken into account for the response of another, and when on that basis social interaction is regulated. At this juncture, an object-identifying consciousness is involved, as one organism understands and registers the gesture of another, and adjusts its own action accordingly. Both together are therefore involved in a social act, and we are now on the plane of real social interaction.

Yet again, the self demands, in order to fully establish its intrinsic reflexive nature, a self-objectifying step, a step which requires that the conversation of gestures be transformed into a genuine communication of significant gestures. This involves the capacity of the organism *to represent to*

herself the response of the other. The previous objective social interaction, which creates a society *in itself*, so to speak, is replaced by the organisms taking themselves the attitude of the other, by objectifying the acts of the other to themselves, by means of which the social interaction becomes *for itself*, becomes a real sharing of the involved perspectives by the agents engaged in the communication. This is the birth of self-reflexive thought, and as such of the human self proper.

In order for the full constitution of the self to emerge, the following conditions thus have to be in place. First, perspective-taking in which one agent represents the attitude of another to herself (and vice versa) must become the shared understanding of the meanings involved. An agent not only knows what the other is going to do, and reflexively adjusts her acts accordingly, but also knows that the other knows that she knows what the other intends. In this scenario, in which both agents interact in an objectively shared world, the taking of the other's perspective thus creates a *common space* in which both can interact. Both can now understand that fledging teeth or a clinched fist means anger and possibly attack by one organism, and might mean fear and flight as a possible response by another organism. And both can now represent the gestures as indicating acts to which both have access to, and thus both understand. With this move, the immediate encapsulation into a pre-scribed action-circle is burst apart, since the diverse action-options of individual agents become accessible for all agents involved, and thus allow for a reflexive adjustment, for a delayed response, to the situation.

But second, this whole scenario already implicitly draws on the *construction of a shared language for a situation*. Indeed, only when the individualized perspective-taking becomes a *communication of significant symbols* in which meaning is shared, the internal requirement for language, i. e. to be a medium of *shared* meaning, is reached. If we now recall that the constitution of self-identity is tied to the taking the attitude of another to oneself, and that the other's perspective must not be experienced as an alien imposition onto the self, but as its own reflexive act, we see that the level of language as shared meaning is essential for self-consciousness. Because the agent can take the other's perspective and understand its meaning, it can use such a perspective with regard to itself without losing itself into an alien realm of external objects or events. Since the constitution of the self as 'object' emerges from the intersubjective source of another human agent, that self can see itself also as a human agent.

This is why Mead sees the constitution of self-consciousness and the emergence of a shared language as two sides of the same developmental process (Mead 1934). Consciousness of self requires an objectifying attitude toward oneself, which comes from taking the perspective of another agent toward oneself. The capacity of perspective-taking involves that the other perspective is understood, and only as such becomes the basis of my self-objectification. But such an understanding can only happen if the self and the other are both involved in the process of *dialogical perspective-taking*, and if out of this process the constitution of shared meaning emerges. If perspective-taking would be a one-sided process undertaken only by one agent, what would be considered the perspective of the other could be a pure projection of one consciousness onto another. Besides the fact that we would here lack the very structure of self-objectification, for which another subject-position outside of one's immediate experience (and yet integrated in its reflexive process) is required, the identification of the meaning of my self would lack any objective (i.e. shared) grounding outside the (potentially shifting, unrealizable, self-referential) perspective of oneself.⁴

Accordingly, self-consciousness requires self-objectification which can be explained by the capability to take the attitude of another subject toward itself. And in order for this process to enable a stable and continuing self-identity, the taking of the other's attitude toward oneself must be co-existent with a medium of shared meaning. It thus requires language. This, however, further implies that for the constitution of self, the presence of the other remains a constant requirement. The self remains dependent on *the recurring recognition of the other*. Only in a context in which interpretive self-attributions exist in an objective realm of socially shared meanings can the self attach an identical sense to itself as self.⁵

⁴ We should think here of Wittgenstein's private language argument in its specific application to the problem of constituting an identical self (Wittgenstein 1953). The self not only needs the other to reflexively see itself as a distinct entity, but it also needs to be able to conduct this process in a shared realm of meaning in which the other remains a permanent partner. Otherwise, the self-objectification would collapse into an inner, unstable, and unchecked sphere.

⁵ Self-identity is thus truly a socially established form of meaning. It allows for social role- or identity-types that individuals can assume as their identity in a shared realm of meaning and for which they can be recognized. The individualizing 'touch' of these roles comes through the filling of the roles with a particular life-history, its unique events, dates, contexts, etc. This is also the source for a unique form of recognition, i.e.

2. Cultural Identity and Hermeneutic Competence

We are now in a position to suggest a dialogical conception of cultural identity that productively mediates between the Scylla of social holism and the Charybdis of atomistic individualism. According to the theory of dialogically constituted selves, the identity of the self is *culturally bounded*. We have seen that the self needs the symbolic medium to identify itself as a stable and identical self. This means that interpretive or symbolic self-attributions need to draw on the stock of available meanings that a cultural context provides. The concrete cultural context thus grounds the general possibility to take a reflexive relation to oneself. Similarly, linguistic analysis shows that meanings do not exist atomistically as independent ‘sense’-data, but rather are holistically embedded in a context of assumptions and practices that form a taken-for-granted background (Searle 1989, 1995; Gadamer 1989; Habermas 1983/1987). Particular speech acts uttered by intentional subjects draw their meaningfulness from being situated in such a shared background understanding. Accordingly, the relation to oneself, one’s self-understanding, is a reflexive construction of identity against and amidst the background of shared meanings and practices. Whatever can count as one’s individual identity is thus grounded in a socially shared realm that defines *me as me*.

Yet this socially based self is also the ground for the possibility to transcend and transform one’s given identity, as the formation of self-identity is itself a process that is shaped by different perspectives derived from social interaction. It is this aspect of self-identity that designates our (admittedly sketchy) conception of a dialogical self as a ground for a normatively desirable and empirically possible practice of intercultural understanding. This systematic intuition can now be stated more clearly: since the self, as we saw, is emergent from a process of symbolically mediated perspective-taking, it entails as a potential the very resources that need to be activated to reach an adequate and truthful understanding of the other. Since we do not just want to outline how intercultural communication should *ideally* look, but also want to point to *empirical* resources that can be utilized to enact this process, the actual constitution of the situated self provides a promising ground indeed. What now needs to be shown is how exactly the

for fulfilling one’s role in a remarkable and exemplary way. See Mead (1934) and Honneth (1995) for discussion of this issue.

dialogical formation of self-identity can support this claim, i.e. how it can lead to an agent-based conception of intercultural recognition.

To begin with, I want to present two systematic points that will help focus and motivate this project. First, if the self is seen as emerging through perspective-taking, a wide-spread misconception concerning the problem of intercultural understanding can be overcome. This is so because the dialogical self is an intrinsically open and perspectival self, which means it can never be identified with one particular and closed-off set of beliefs and practices. The self emerges, precisely as a culturally situated one, through a variety of conceptions and practices. Those symbolic assumptions and social practices entail concrete meanings and establish particular attitudes, but the fact that they are appropriated by adopting them from the external source of social others implies that the emergent self remains intrinsically tied to dialogical openness and a pluralism of perspectives. If this is true, then the issue of encountering other and possibly very different conceptions and practices poses itself not in terms of leaving one fixed identity behind so as to reach or enter another one, but rather as an activation and opening of the current set of beliefs, assumptions and practices toward other such beliefs, assumptions and practices. The idea is one of an expansion of the scope of meaningful perspectives from within an already pluralized scope of self-identity, rather than assuming a fixed cultural identity facing the fixed block of another cultural context.

Second, the dialogical formation of self-identity is not a process that simply happens to a pre-existing self, but it rather brings to life a self that did not as such previously exist. In this regard, the dialogical process of self-formation transcends the traditional opposition of activity and passivity inherited from the philosophy of consciousness and tied to the idea of a self-sufficient mind that entails spontaneity in some respects and passivity in others. If we conceive of the self as dialogically emergent through adopting perspectives, we are dealing with a unique fusion of external and internal moments that ultimately make a clear-cut distinction between the passive and the active aspects of identity impossible. True, one could hold that the material content of external perspectives as well as the structural condition for perspective-taking (by providing contact with social others) is pre-given, while the process of adopting those perspectives and fusing them into a more or less coherent self-identity displays the activity of the subject. But the essential point is that the dialogical self only emerges as a subject capable of adopting those perspectives and thus constructing a (situated and culturally grounded) identity *through the existence of exter-*

nal perspectives. The subsequently achieved autonomy of organizing those perspectives through reflexive choice and deliberation is thus grounded in a culturally pre-given context which forms the resources for developing one's agency in this regard.⁶ The self thus emerges by developing those resources as agent-based capabilities which enable perspective-taking and the construction of the identity of an autonomous self (Kögler 2000). For our project of intercultural understanding, we have to reconstruct those interpretive capabilities that allow for the dialogical constitution of self-identity. If we can identify the particular hermeneutic competences that come to pass through the development of a perspectival self, we hold, I suggest, the key to those attitudes that help open the door to meaning and values of other cultural practices.

A hermeneutic competence can be defined as the capability of a human agent to creatively respond to a given context or challenge by reconstructing frames of understanding and action relative to a certain value-orientation (Weber 1978). The concept of hermeneutic competence is thus intrinsically related to the conception of intentional human agency, according to which agents are bound to act purposefully on the basis of conceptual-practical pre-understandings vis-à-vis their intentional goals (including the means and contexts of their realization.) An agent acts hermeneutically competent if he or she is able to realize the value or purpose relative to an interpretive scheme, but based on a creative, cognitively adequate, and value-realizing project. What is at stake is thus the flexible and context-based adjustment of given schemes (necessarily provided by the background understanding) and a given situation within which an *interpretive skill* is exercised. An important double feature of a hermeneutic competence is that it is (a) *reflexive*, i.e. that it is skill that involves the conscious re-assessment, re-conceptualization, and re-construction of aspects of the situation (and oneself in it), and (b) *situated*, i.e. that it is always already

⁶ It is here that a general and convincing argument for multicultural concerns has its place: if selves are culturally shaped, in order to flourish they require a replenishment or even preservation of precisely those contexts that helped make them who they are (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1992). Yet we will also see that the dialogical core of cultural selves allows them to expand their horizon, and thus to recreate themselves in contexts not initially given. And we should not forget that such cultural background contexts are not only enabling, but can also have restrictive and 'disabling' effects on their agents. For a stimulating critique that exposes problems in the wide-spread use of 'culture'--however at the expense of doing full justice to its resource-providing function--see Appiah 2005.

embedded in a given context that engulfs and pre-grounds whatever can and needs to be thought and done.

We will now introduce three basic value-orientations in which agents are bound to display skills and capabilities that fit the aforementioned definition. The most relevant value-orientations are toward self-realization (1), successful participation in social and cultural interaction (2), and a general understanding of world and self (3). We will do so by reconstructing relevant social-scientific and social-theoretical approaches that have articulated those value-orientations with an eye toward the involved hermeneutic capacities. Needless to say, the three value-orientations we shall discuss are often intertwined, but it is nevertheless possible to keep them analytically apart and distinguish different discursive practices with regard to their respective value-orientations.

(1) The value of self-realization has been emphasized in a relevant way by cultural approaches within psychology (as well as by post-Nietzschean and Foucauldian accounts of the self). Rejecting either a behaviorist or third-personal approach to the self, these psychological accounts understand the self as an ongoing narratively self-constructed process. The self becomes a self-referential autopoietic ‘entity’ that brings itself into existence through the ongoing orientation at self-chosen values that are taken to be crucial and thus come to constitute its identity (Billmann-Mahecha/Straub 2006). The self is considered real, as it really exists in those acts of self-understanding, and yet it is not seen in a Cartesian or essentialist manner, as it is an emergent self-reflexive reality situated in a shared context of cultural values.

What is crucial in our discussion is that this narrativist framework shows that subjective agents emerge as *active constructors of their own selves based on existing value-frameworks*. In other words, what really constitutes them as selves is their capacity to relate *themselves* to values. Selves emerge by maintaining an identity over the course of a life-time, which involves a constant, flexible, and reflexive adjustment of one’s own situation to chosen value-orientations. Self-realization is thus oriented toward values that are supposed to realize what is (the) good for the self—but as such they are themselves symbolical-practical vehicles of the constitution of selves as selves.⁷

⁷ Cultural psychology developed a set of categorial distinctions here, for example the one between being able *to reinterpret* certain values in light of changed circumstances, or *to abandon* the values themselves for alternative ones. The subject’s capacity to retain a healthy and happy life is crucially dependent on being able to creatively adjust

(2) While the hermeneutic dimension is brought out well in the narrative self-psychology, since selves emerge here by continuously reinterpreting their existence, the psychological perspective restricts the focus on how one constructs a good life for oneself. This limitation is overcome by sociological and social-theoretical perspectives that ask about how the (socially situated) selves are related to social contexts. More precisely, it shows how subjects are constituted by being made participants in social and cultural life. What is crucial here is that the social sources of selfhood are seen as background features that help explain why a certain *symbolic understanding of agents* emerges in the way it does. Bourdieu's cultural sociology, for instance, emphasizes that *the habitus* is a real force in social life, because it constitutes something like an agent's incorporated and tacitly presupposed 'world-view' (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The habitus is seen as an intermediary category that relates objective social conditions to the conscious, intentional, and explicitly value-oriented acts of individuals.

Again, this cultural dimension does not exist in terms of fixed conceptual schemes, nor is it identical with behaviorist mechanisms that trigger an agent's response based on previous experiences in light of new events. It is rather a true *hermeneutic skill*, in the sense that it represents a socially-induced pre-understanding of how to perceive, act, and think in terms of a symbolically mediated value-understanding. While the habitus can be reconstructed as schemes, it does not exist in 'frozen' or crystallized form, but rather in the ongoing activation through agents who owe their identity to the previous symbolic and practical contexts of engagement. Accordingly, the habitus enables agents to successfully participate in the manifold social and cultural contexts. Agents have to acquire the capability to orient their acts at the generally shared understanding of a given value in order to make creative, beneficial, and mutually comprehensible contributions to a given social field.

(3) However, both the individual and the social dimension of self-understanding can be superseded toward an even more general and encompassing sense of reflexive self-understanding. The agent's capacity to thematize the world as such is a discursive possibility well established by a host of generalized modes of reflection, including myth, religion and theology, metaphysics and epistemology, moral and social theory, and modern philosophical discourse. What interests us here is the general reflexivity that takes account of its own historical-cultural situatedness, yet without

one's own aspirations and goals to the changing objective opportunities for their realization. See in particular Greve/Suhlamm in Billmann-Mahecha/Straub 2006.

abandoning its intrinsic claim to understand the world truthfully, i.e. to achieve an adequate general understanding (and not just a fiction, illusion, or imaginary account) of existence. I suggest we call this particular form of situated reflexivity *hermeneutic consciousness*. The structure of hermeneutic consciousness can be brought out by realizing that it dramatizes the temporal sense of situatedness that defines the modern-philosophical self-consciousness.

Modern philosophical discourse expresses a very particular interpretive skill by combining the two aspects of hermeneutic competence, reflexivity and situatedness (Habermas 1987; Foucault 1990). Gadamer captured this move by defining the result of his philosophical-hermeneutic reflections as ‘historically effected consciousness’ (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) (Gadamer 1989). A self that is defined by a hermeneutic consciousness remains intrinsically oriented at values that it deems crucial and important—and thus avoids a self-debilitating relativism (Hollis/Lukes 1982, Krausz 1989)—but is similarly aware that all such value-orientations are essentially shaped by particular cultural, social, and political contexts—and thus avoids the abstraction of a punctual or atomic self (Taylor 1995).⁸

The uniqueness of this cognitive attitude can be seen by its difference to transcendental and historical consciousness. The *transcendental reflection* assumes that the reflexive attitude in philosophy can reach a level of self-sustained meaning or validity. In order to guarantee and ground this assumption, the claim of a separate sphere of pure consciousness or meaning

⁸ The psychological-biographical and the sociological-culturalist modes of reflexivity both remain focused on some empirical-contextual ground of agency, be it either the individual’s or the social environment’s structuration of meaning. This involves an essential relativism, as the meaning is seen as relative to the self, however situated, or relative to the social class position. Philosophical discourse traditionally assumed a stance of unbroken universality—which cannot be sustained—but it assumes *in its modern version* the stance of reconstructing the grounds of validity or truth-claims *on the basis of our situated, historical, temporal, and linguistically mediated existence*. The discursive practices of philosophy thus actualize the potential of language to transcend individual and social life-contexts to reflect on some general aspects of existence, meaning, etc. This reflexive move, which consists in accepting a historically situated origin of discourse while maintaining a trans-contextual stance with regard to meaning and validity, defines all important philosophical projects since Hegel. Whether in the evolutionary form of the philosophy of history, in phenomenology, analytic theory of meaning, neo-Kantianism, and recent normative speech act theory and communication theory—the project is to reconstruct *from within the existing modes of action and discourse* the possible access to a universal realm of meaning.

has to be made. This realm is taken to be gleaned from structures of consciousness, as in Neo-Kantianism or Husserl, or from symbolic forms, as in Cassirer or analytic positivism. However, against this assumption, the phenomenology of understanding (*Verstehen*) reveals that pre-assumptions always shape and pre-guide our understanding, which means that any intentional understanding of something as something is internally defined by holistically complex and temporally changing background-assumptions (Gadamer 1989; Dreyfus 1980; Kögler 1999). The assumed self-certainty of the subject and its meanings is thus an illusion; the substance of history rules over the subject's allegedly pure intentions.

Yet the claim of *historical consciousness* that all meaning is relative to historical and cultural contexts equally misconstrues the nature of understanding, since it reduces all meaning-intentions to particular epochs and contexts that are presented as self-sufficiently closed and fully defined in their structure. This move ignores the intentional meaning-core which is part of human speech and which essentially points beyond any particular context by assuming to be comprehensible by any human agent. Furthermore, it inconsistently assumes for its own understanding a position above all particular meaning-contexts, as it proclaims the possibility to objectively understand all historical meaning by being 'equally' distant to all epochs (Ranke) in its quasi-God's eye view on history. Here, the fact that access to meaningful expressions requires reconstruction of the intentional concepts, which involves bringing into play one's own intentional pre-conceptions, which in turn are embedded in a concrete holistic context, proves that such a 'position above all positions' is a methodological fiction (Gadamer 1989).

It follows that the *situatedness of consciousness* is grounds for rejecting a pure sphere of meaning or consciousness, which plays a role in both transcendental philosophy and historicism. Positively, this means that a reflexively situated self-understanding has to take into account its orientation at values and concepts, and yet do so based on the awareness of its own historical-cultural-social contingency. Serious value-orientations grounded in concrete cultural contexts define the cognitive attitude of a hermeneutically enlightened consciousness.

3. The Dialogical Recognition of Others

This consciousness of situatedness vis-à-vis one's own self-understanding can now become the ground for a *hermeneutic ethos toward understanding*

others. The hermeneutic ethos, understood as an intentional orientation toward the other and the other's meaning, consists in addressing the other as someone with whom one can reach a mutual understanding about something (*ein wechselseitiges Verständnis über etwas erreichen*). The other agent is conceived as someone who is intentionally oriented toward issues, values, and situations (including an attitude toward the good life and hermeneutic competences to participate in social life), and who can also share the meta-understanding of this process (i.e. is capable of a hermeneutic consciousness). Yet the particular *hermeneutic ethos* stems from the reflexive understanding of the interpretive situation, which as hermeneutic consciousness knows its own pre-understanding to be shaped by particular cultural concepts and practices. Thus, while the interpretive orientation is intentionally geared toward issues or subject matters, it is always accompanied by a reflexive understanding of the role of conceptual schemes and practices that pre-guide what one understands and interprets.

From this follows that one cannot assume that to rationally understand the other simply means *to translate* the other into one's own terms, as those terms might miss what contextually defines the other's beliefs, assumptions, and practices. They would thus fail to be adequate to the self-understanding of the other. Furthermore, since one is situated and thus lacks a transcendental or ontological access to truth, any possible difference in belief cannot a priori be explained as error, confusion, or ideology on the side of the other. If we thus stick to intentional understanding, keeping contextual situatedness in mind, we have to approach the other's meaning from the perspective of someone engaged *in a dialogue* where openness and intent to first understand the perspective of the other is required. The other cannot be approached but in the attempt to reconstruct how he or she would understand the concepts and issues at stake, as one's own situatedness precludes any objective or universally pre-justified assessment of the meaning of the other. Yet as we are engaged in an intentional understanding of the beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the other, it similarly means that we cannot make sense of the other except for relating the other's meaning to our own cultural preconceptions and practices. Thus, while our concepts are ruled out as pre-given standards of judgment, our concepts and assumptions nonetheless must be invested and tested if understanding is to occur at all. The *ethos of hermeneutic dialogue* tries to capture and articulate this very dialectic.

The understanding of a symbolic expression is oriented at meaning (*Sinn*), i.e. at *understanding* what is said. Yet to understand meaning, we

have to understand the content of what is being said, i.e. to be oriented at the subject matter of whatever a text says (or an action intends). Now, in order to get access to the subject matter, we have to relate what is said about something *to our own conceptions*, and to assume that what is said about the issue at stake ‘makes sense.’ In other words, since symbolic expressions ‘acquire’ sense by being meaningful *to us*, we have to be able to project plausible beliefs and assumptions onto the other’s expressions. To understand them, we need to render them as saying something plausible, something that makes sense. Gadamer calls this an ‘anticipation of rational completeness’ (Gadamer 1989) and Davidson reconstructs this as the ‘principle of charity’ (Davidson 1984). Accordingly, only if we can reconstruct a *plausible account* of the other’s statements—plausible in our eyes, maximizing truth in our eyes—can we assume to understand the other. As understanding requires us to make sense, the interpretation necessarily involves an attempt to reconstruct the other’s statements and acts in a manner that is somewhat rational to us.

Yet while this rational assumption as it stands is a necessary precondition for understanding, we also know that hermeneutic consciousness understands itself to be situated, which means it must be interested in taking into account the concreteness and alterity of the other *vis-à-vis* oneself. It is important, however, to show how the understanding of the particularity of the other emerges from within an intentional value-orientation at meaningful sense, so that the biographical or sociological reduction is avoided, while the relative right of their perspectives is preserved. And here we see that even though the interpretation must necessarily begin from one’s own taken-to-be-true background beliefs, the process of interpretive understanding is not adequately described by maximizing true beliefs or by realizing a truth-based fusion-of-horizons. What is rather happening in the intercultural context is an increasing sense of the basic assumptions that guide another’s statements and acts, and that allow one to infer and reconstruct the beliefs and assumptions as seen against the other’s concrete assumptions and values. While such a differentiation is of course located in a context in which one does agree on basic concepts, the subtleties of the other’s beliefs and perspectives are understood as one’s own horizons learns to employ the other’s assumptions and to construct and organize beliefs as according to the other’s perspective. Translatability in terms of true sentences is not to be achieved, as the beliefs are often relative to value-assumptions that alone define their contextual validity (MacIntyre 1971; also Winch 1991, 1964). Thus, respecting the other as an intentional agent

with whom one enters into dialogue must involve a respect and recognition of the concrete background assumptions underlying the other agent's concept of rational or plausible action.

However, with this first step the reconstruction of different symbolic horizons remains entirely on the level of a conceptual reconstruction of premises of understanding. Yet to fully account for the other's agency, we have not only to make sense of the other, but also show that those concepts *actually lead the other to act*, that they form the causally motivating background on the basis of which the other's speech acts and social practices are undertaken. Here, we need to include a perspective that leaves the purely symbolic level behind and reconstructs the *psychological grounds* on the basis of which individual agents act. As we are interested in agency, we need here an empirical anchor that relates to the particular agency that would explain why an agent chooses a certain behavior over another. This will necessarily be mediated by our understanding of the other's symbolic-cultural background, but it will essentially draw on the basic capacity of perspective-taking as it involves empathetic aspects of understanding another agent's commitment to basic values, emotional responses to one's life experiences, and in particular the need for recognition that defines socially constituted selves. This dimension thus broadens the hermeneutic perspective beyond the internally rational and language-based approach. However, it is important here not to assume any direct access to the other psyche, but to mediate those accounts by a discursive reconstruction of the other's beliefs and assumptions (Kögler/Stueber 2000).

Yet if we thus embed the other meaning not merely in another symbolic order, but also in some concretely situated agency, we cannot overlook that such agency and its particular social and cognitive competences are always socially shaped. This follows already from the thesis of cultural identity-formation. It takes on a methodological significance because it forces us to take into account *the social structures that causally shape the build-up of the self-understanding of agents*. In the methodological discussions surrounding hermeneutics as a social science method, the need to complement a purely linguistic or psychological perspective by one that analyses social power structures was early on emphasized (Habermas 1988, 1990; Gadamer 1990). The understanding of meaning—if 'understanding' is here not arbitrarily limited to a very narrow domain—must involve all factors that contribute to its structure—and that involves an analysis of the forms of power that implicitly define intentional self-understanding (Foucault 1979; Hacking 1999).

If we now put this methodological reflection on its normative feet, we arrive at three modes of hermeneutic recognition that are borne out by interpretive dialogue.

(1) The other agent is recognized as *a reflexive self* that is capable of engaging in a context-transcending process of self-understanding. True, to rationally recognize another agent, we have to take her by her word, have to interpret her cultural acts, expressions, and practices. Yet we always know that the other's intentions and reflexive thoughts are potentially beyond those particular forms of expression, that they can be expanded by dialogue itself, and that agents can take a reflexive stance toward their contexts and practices. There is thus no reduction of individual agency to cultural identity—on the contrary, we recognize the universality of the other through her particular dealings in her context and culture.

(2) While we thus universally recognize the other as reflexive self, the other is also always recognized in *his or her cultural particularity*. The self beyond the actual realm of societal and cultural relations is an empty fiction, and we made clear that we abandoned the notion of a transcendental or atomic self. This involves that a person's recognition involves the recognition of her cultural context as *prima facie* valuable, as a realm of identification that defines the very 'essence' of subjectivity we are dealing with. The interpretive reconstruction of the other's culturally embedded self-understanding is thus a normative guidepost for all understanding, since it is the creative and particular construction of cultural identities which constitutes the other's real human nature. However, once this recognition is in place and the reconstruction of value-assumptions is in process, the mutual challenge, criticism, and transformation of assumed value-preferences is part and parcel of intercultural understanding understood as a serious dialogue.

(3) Finally, and on the basis of taking social situatedness seriously, we recognize that the other is essentially co-defined by pre-existing power relations. Hermeneutic competences required for social life are acquired by participating in hierarchically organized relations entailing a differential access to cognitive, economic, and emotional resources. Accordingly, to fully recognize the other, we have to take into account *his or her vulnerable nature*, his or her constrainedness by objective social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Our concept of agency would fall prey to a hermeneutic illusion were we to build its understanding on pure self-transparency or autonomy regarding action-intentions and means. To locate the other's projects and practices in a context defined by trans-subjective

social forces recognizes a truth about the other: his or her empirical heteronomy. Yet if we always combine this mode of recognition with the two previous ones, namely recognition of the other as a reflexive agent and recognition of the other agent as culturally distinct, we will be able to avoid the paternalizing stance of earlier forms of ideology-critique or ethnocentric attributions of irrationality.

We need always keep in mind that the *ethos of hermeneutic dialogue* conceives of the roots of recognition as operating *similarly between the self and the other*. Universal respect for the other as reflexive self, hermeneutic sensitivity toward the other's cultural background, and a critical reflexivity regarding the power constraints imposed on situated selves, are considered interpretive ideals which should guide both sides. First and foremost, it should enable any interpreter, whether theorist or agent, to see herself from the perspective of the other.

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