Cultural Diversity: Its social epistemology

You cannot step twice into the same river;
for other waters are ever flowing on to you.
Heracleitus, On the Universe

Introduction

In the contemporary world, the celebration of difference and avowal of identity politics have come to be regarded as the hallmarks of a progressive, modern society. Yet, the once-clear definitions of “us” and “them” are being blurred in the confusing interface of national, cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. Citizens in politically vulnerable societies are more and more aware of the increasing anxiety about the presence of the “Other”. And this is all the more true regarding societies that suffer from communal rivalries, and on top of it, have to grapple with problems of social and political organisation due to the presence of an increasing number of refugees on its soil. The alarming number of devastating conflicts and civil wars spins off problems that necessitate new learning and new solutions to new problems, compelling us to stretch the limits of our customary imagination and self-understanding.

Before addressing the topic, we need to be aware that a major obstacle in the field of cultural diversity is the fluidity, hybridity and complexity of the term culture. What makes “culture” a complicated and contested word is its lack of objectivity. “Culture” is not an entity, it is rather a mobile signifier that enables distinct and divergent ways of talking about human activity for a variety of purposes (Fuller 2014: 99-100). Cultural beliefs and ideals address citizens belonging to different social and political strata, and are the result of laborious negotiations in which significant voices are silenced, others not. Consequently, various members in a cultural group will have heterogeneous histories, divergent behaviours, rituals, functions, and antagonistic interpretations (Fuller 2014: 99). Put in a nutshell, cultures are tense loci of hierarchized social relations, differences and oppositions.

As a tiny country embedded in a conflict zone and known for its delicate balance of communalism\(^1\), Lebanon provides an interesting example of cultural diversity. The country is exerting strenuous efforts to tackle the immense number of refugees

\(^1\) The proportional sharing of power between the country’s religious communities
coming from Syria, who in the last few years have been the battleground for an extremely devastating civil war (van Vliet 2016: 89). Although Lebanon’s relative socio-economic and political stability is exacerbated by the complex issue arising from the presence of refugees, turning the country into one of the most densely populated in the Mediterranean area, it is no less important for Lebanese nationals to seize this opportunity to (re)visit the narratives that endorse their homeland’s official ethos of cultural coexistence (ta’ayush). The mere affirmation that Lebanon’s rugged, mountainous terrain has served as an asylum for diverse ethnic groups and for political dissidents throughout history is far from offering a viable solution to the nation’s strained balance of communal power sharing (Abboud & Muller 2016: 14-38).

At the heart of concerns are reflections upon who we are as cultural beings and whether we share the same world or not.

Author Salman Rushdie has reflected upon the process of alienation and (re)discovery of self and was constantly embattled between positions. First as a Muslim in predominantly Hindu India, next as an Indian immigrant to Pakistan, and then as an Indian-Pakistani living in Britain, Rushdie was invariably facing the physical and psychological distance from familiar milieus. In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) Rushdie tries to draw attention to the opportunities of a world of differences:

> Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective may provide us with such angles (p. 15).

Unlike Rushdie, Lebanese nationals need to grapple with the psychological distance rather than the physical, as different ethnic groups live side by side in the country. A recent study shows that nearly 30 years of various military conflicts were not enough to erode the lack of empathy among Lebanese citizens belonging to different denominations (Gordon 2015, chap IV). The social apathy familiar to many Lebanese is possibly accentuated by the swirling global transformations that affect the social and moral organisation of societies. Lebanon’s official slogan of cultural coexistence (ta’ayush) is more than ever polluted by a hollowed and misguided discourse due to a lack of a coherent educational system and a week civil society (Geha 2016: 14-15). It is probably time to step back and engage in a thorough and deep reflection upon the founding values of Lebanon’s cultural diversity. Such a course of action is all the more necessary in order to concur and possibly contain the hitherto widely resonant apologetic/polemic stance (Abboud & Muller 2016: Chap 2).
Central research question

Insights such Rushdie’s inform my effort in this study to theorize about the phenomenon of cultural diversity. A body of personal and empirical insights serve as the grounding for my attempt to offer a social epistemological approach to cross-cultural encounters. However, the main concern here is not whether cultural differences can pave the way for a deep understanding of self and others, but how and why, as the future belongs to multicultural societies, and in particular to those who are able to manage their heterogeneity. Guiding this effort is a broad question that will provide a springboard for a comprehensive discussion about “us and them”: Do people from different cultures live in different worlds?

At the forefront of this new reality are various waves of migration, people moving across national and cultural boundaries. Think of the millions of refugees who abandoned their homes the last few years. Trapped inside rapidly shrinking areas of combat and driven by political oppression, terrorist aggressions, or hopes of social and economic prosperity, people uproot themselves from their beloved families and embark on journeys of building new lives in alien and possibly even hostile milieus.

Although the tribulations that can arise from cross-cultural encounters are often staggering, success stories are detectible. The European Commission commended recently the government and people of Lebanon for its generosity towards the Syrian refugees. Yet, the Commission’s report unveiled also a serious concern about the deteriorating conditions of the most vulnerable ones (ECHO factsheet, 2016).

Aim

The following is the aim of this study:

- Examine the philosophical basis of our cultural ideals and beliefs.

Objectives

The following objectives have been set to in order to fulfil the aim of the study:

- Analyse the moral and intellectual foundations of our cultural differences
- Search for profound human similarities.

A philosophical dialog about cultural diversity is a prerequisite to explore the ultimate character of reality and the foundation of morality. Such a dialog, unfortunately, is commonly restrained to some representatives of the academic and clerical elites in
Lebanon (Chamussy 2008). It never gains the other strata of society for multiple reasons, chief among them is the lack of awareness within the establishment and the fear of religious polemics based on the assumption that such a dialog aims eventually at calling into question the imaginary objects of human religious attitudes, including the traditional interpretation of dogmas within each denomination. After all, intellectual individualism has never been popular in any institutional religion due to its critical stance towards religions that encourage simple faith and alleged universal authority (Bistolfi 2008).

If we fail to undergo the hardship and ambivalence of crossing-culture, we might probably never comprehend the world we live in. It is certainly a painful, yet necessary, life-journey that compels us to search for those “cultural invariants” within us – facets that we hold dear and refuse to compromise. Meanwhile, questioning the boundaries of our self-understanding might outline an underlying fear of alienating ourselves from established values in our society. Put differently: Does this collective (re)invention, transformation and growth necessarily require that we abandon our former personalities and the cultures we were born into?

**Mapping reality**

Many today share the view that all knowledge is essentially perspectival in character; i.e. knowledge claims and their assessment always take place within a subjective framework through which the world is described and explained. The claim that “it is all subjective” reinforces the assumption that one’s knowledge is self-reflexive, meaning that people have different perspectives on reality. According to perspectivism, reality is never directly available to cognizers in some unmediated way. Rather, cognizers approach reality from their own slant, with their own assumptions, preconceptions and vocabulary (Giere 2010: 4). However, does a finite understanding of and differing views about reality necessarily imply that people have different realities, as radical perspectivism would have it?

Perspectivism replaced positivism as the dominant view. In general, positivists thought that genuine knowledge could be obtained by combining empirical observation and logical reasoning in a manner best exemplified in natural sciences. The later suggests that scientists should be able to rid themselves of their biases in order to grasp directly the facts about reality. Empirical observation, logical reasoning, and testing freed of preconception, thus, are the means by which facts are ascertained and explained (Caldwell 2010: 13).

Why does positivism gradually yield to perspectivism? There is a widespread conviction that science is identical with the accumulation or the juxtaposition of facts. If this was the case, the British Telephone Book or any statistic data would be candidates for the Nobel Prize.
Science is rather explanatory as well as descriptive. Scientists cannot communicate with each other through equations. They must sort facts in order to produce meaning through a series of observations and testing. Imagine yourself being asked to describe the covering of the first, immediate state of emergency by the Civil Protection due to a bike accident. Without a spatio-temporal nexus your testimony would undoubtedly be an incoherent jumble of descriptive statements. Moreover, the listener (or reader) is drawn into your testimony through a combination of the information that is given in relation to the information that is left out. Listeners must more than or at least half of the time supply the missing (or implied) information by filling in the gaps (Almasi & Fullerton 2012: 130). Without a coherent narrative, thus, you would have no way of sorting facts into appropriate levels: the conspicuous would be indiscriminately mixed up with the trivial because you would have no way of telling which was which. Nor could you discern the superficial from the deep (Almasi & Fullerton 2012: 131).

Though narratives are not faithful mirrors of reality, they constitute nevertheless instruments by which reality is represented and rationalised (Longo 2015, 5). Descriptions are only possible if they embrace a strategy for sense-making that is anchored in a rational-scientific model. A sense making occurs when describers are in possession of a conceptual scheme, or principles on the basis of which they can pass judgments. Thus, for example, one must already know what constitutes normal bike operation before he or she can tell that the blue bike losing a wheel is a significant fact. A traffic accident is not a state of affairs which present itself immediately sorted out and identified. Think of the facts about the accident: “the blue bike lost its front wheel”; “a young mother with a child in a buggy crossing the street swerved to the right”; “the side of the buggy was crumpled and covered in blue paint”. Each of these facts consists of phenomena picked out and grouped under a particular description (Ibid.). Note here that it is never phenomena themselves that are the facts but phenomena under a particular description. Describers make sense of people and events through codes of phrases, and terms to mark and frame what is to be understood. Facts are thus linguistically meaningful entities in the sense that they necessitate a vocabulary that provide the building blocks for factual descriptions (Halliday 2014: 7-10). Without this vocabulary, scientists or non-professionals would literally be mute, unable to say anything at all. Put succinctly, facts are linguistically significant products that are rooted in principles that govern our thoughts, beliefs, desire, assumptions, morals, reasoning, etc. (Halliday 2014: 538-42).

By stressing that knowledge of society is a function of the linguistic and conceptual scheme within which particular agents (scientists for instance) live and operate, perspectivism implies that no way of seeing the world can be taken as definitely “true”. However, competing worldviews do not imply that different conceptual schemes are equally valid by
necessity. For instance, unlike an authoritarian rule, the concept of pluralism and tolerance in liberal societies are considered crucial elements of good governance (Krämer 2015: 169).

Perspectivism combined with an insistence on radical conceptual scheme contains within itself the seeds of relativism. As a doctrine, relativism underlines that all kind of truth, be it ethical, cognitive, cultural, or aesthetic is relative and has no objective standards. Put differently, truth can only be determined from within a particular conceptual scheme (Siegel 1987: 2). According to *ethical relativism*, no cross-framework judgments are permissible. The sexual morality in Islamic patriarchal societies, for instance, is fundamentally different from that of a post-Christian world. The emphasis upon "self-restraint", "polite reserve" and "respect", ascribed to women in a large number of Muslim communities, is non-relevant in societies not bound by religious considerations. The following quotation of Blaise Pascale illustrates beautifully the subordination of ethics to the social construct: “Plaisante justice qu’une rivière borne”.

As for *ontological relativism*, reality itself is virtually determined by the linguistic system in our minds (Halliday 2014: 538-42), or as Thomas Kuhn indicates that all that we can say about the world is how it appears (Hales 2011: 480). Moreover, in construing experience through language we have a range of lexical and grammatical options on which we can draw, and the choice of one particular means of expressing our experience over another is the process by which we construe our reality (Halliday 2014: 538-42). The Bedouins literary legacy recognises for instance more than ten denotations of the word desert. Therefore, it is likely that they experience the nuances of the desert landscape differently from those whose terminology is less extensive. Gadamer indicates that language does not only refer to the world-view of the speaker, it demarcates the very limit of his Being too (Gadamer in Willis 2010: 187). Ludwig Wittgenstein shares also this perspective: “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein & Hacker 2009: xiv).

Ultimately, ontological epistemology suggests that there is no basis to distinguish between our experience of reality and reality itself (Blurr 2003: 16-17). People inhabiting different conceptual schemes do not just think about or experience the same world differently; instead, they live in different worlds. Critics of relativism dismiss, however, the final picture of relativism, that is, isolated groups trapped inside separate spheres unable to reach out, share or communicate with others in different cultures (Potter 2004: 952). Relativism ending in separatism undermines perniciously all endeavour trying to improve people’s ways of managing cultural diversity.

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2. بادية، عراء، فُرَ، بَرِيَّة، خَلَاء، بَيَاء، قَفْرَة الخ.
Relativism and the search for ethical universals

One of the deepest motivations behind relativism, and one of its most attractive features, is its recognition of difference and respect for it. Relativists maintain that in different cultures different standards of cognitive evaluation are used, leading to different sets of beliefs. Thus, there is no Archimedean position from which one can judge these different standards (Ibid.). One possible implication of this is the problem of incommensurability, which refer to “phenomena whereby two paradigms, or scientific claims produced within different paradigms, cannot be assessed or understood according to common criteria or concepts” (Hales 2011: 480).

Trumpeting and celebrating difference encompasses the risk of alienating cultures from each other. How ironic, motivated by a deep appreciation of the ways people are different from one other, relativism ends up separating them into enclaves of mutual incomprehension. Philosophers defending relativism need to overcome several difficulties, an obvious one being that in their own practice as philosophers they seem to make claims that transcend cultures. A position that opponents of relativism find self-refuting (Smith 2008: 751). Something has thus gone wrong with this line of reasoning. The following example acknowledges difference without making it into a wall of separation where cultures and epochs are closed off from each other.

Although a varied religious composition is a distinctive feature of Lebanon’s social structure, there are substantial traits that contest the strained heterogeneous ethnic and linguistic composition of the country. Lebanon is the only country in the Muslim world where Christian orthodox and Catholics as well as Sunni and Shia Muslims agreed to meet and forge a partnership regarding the governance of the country. That is not to say of course that sectarianism and clientelism do not stir up grievances among different groups in the country. Nevertheless, the Lebanese experience is a buffer of religious and sectarian tensions, particularly in this critical phase which is dominated by violent extremism in the Middle East (Henry, Hyang & Lee 2013: 267).

Let us assume that all knowledge is perspectival, resting on fundamental presuppositions and that deep difference exists among competing conceptual schemes, which incidentally explains why discontinuity is a mark of the history of cultures (Chua 2012: 17-18). Should relativism adhere to these assumptions? No. If the thesis of relativism consisting that it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, criticize, or interfere with the values of another society was logically coherent, it would not only follow that members of one culture or historical era could never criticize on moral grounds the socially approved practices of another time or place; there could also be no such thing as moral progress (Ting-Toomay 2015: 612-613). The fight against totalitarian ideologies such as Nazism and Fascism, the
abolition of slavery etc. could not be seen as a moral accomplishment, but merely as a political shift. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, overturning centuries of injustice, could only be viewed as peculiarities of mid-twentieth century political movements.

Failing to see that difference requires a background of a higher moral synthesis, relativism overemphasizes difference while failing to appreciate what is shared. The following example explains the rationale. To Islamic scholars, the best theoretical use of reason is *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in applying the divine doctrines (belief in the Oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad). Defined as a descriptive method of the essences of things, philosophy, according to Muslim scholarship, turns out to be a twisted endeavour to understand the world. The Islamic scholar al Nadawi (1983) argues for instance that Western thought is inherently material, i.e. unaffected by the spiritual and immaterial world. Sayyed Qutb, an iconic figure within the Islamic Brotherhood, declares that philosophic Western discourse is rooted in the human mind, whereas religious discourse provides immunity from human imperfection and ignorance since it corresponds with the divinely inspired conscience (Qutb 1964). Qutb considers philosophies such as positivism, relativism, and rationalism as defective sources because of its ignorance of human nature (Ibid.). Averroës (also called Ibn Rushd), a medieval influential Islamic philosopher, on the contrary, tried to integrate Islamic traditions with ancient Greek thoughts (Ibn Rushd, 1964).

Do these divergent views upon human cognitive activities designate utterly distinct concepts of knowledge? Are they intertranslatable at all? Though Islamic scholarship describes its Western counterpart as a human heritage, it is not opposed to knowledge. In fact, Islamic scholarship recognises two main categories of knowledge: religious knowledge (*ilm*), i.e. knowledge revealed by God, and profane knowledge, designating disciplines of foreign origin that came by means of translations (Brague 2009: 163).

Different concepts of knowledge do not necessary presuppose different realities. Our ideas do not constitute our reality, as ontological relativism would have it. We might define reality as that which resists us, as that which jumps and bites us despite our beliefs, desires, and the deep presuppositions of our conceptual schemes. At a time, the terror organisation al Qaeda was considered the most vicious manifestation of Islamic militancy. But then came the so called “Islamic State” under the leadership of Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al Badri, alias al Khalifa al Baghdadi, “Prince of the Faithful” (Lovelace Jr. 2016, 69). Reality, thus, escapes our grasp regardless of our conceptual schemes.

**Conclusion**

Taken to its logical conclusion the notion of radically different paradigms competing with one another implodes on itself. Competing paradigms must refer to the *same* world, and must
share sufficiently similar vocabulary and canons of investigation. Without a translatable concept of knowledge for instance, the Islamic paradigm and its Western counterpart would be mute. Put differently, it is meaningless to stress Otherness and not assume a minimum of human similarities. In Jürgen Habermas, this conflation is achieved by an argument of the following sort: Communication and other fundamental forms of social interaction would be impossible without presupposing common standards of validation (Habermas 1988:77).

Consequently, the thesis of relativism – that others can recognizably live meaningfully within worlds incommensurable with ours – is mistaken. According to the Lebanese-born French author Amin Maalouf, the search for deep human similarities requires the ability to reconsider the ways our traditions and beliefs impact our lives. Maalouf (2009) calls upon a common code of ethics that transcends narrow traditions and cultural affiliations:

C’est seulement si l’on croit à cette aventure commune que l’on peut donner un sens à nos itinéraires spécifiques. Et c’est seulement si l’on croit à l’égale dignité des cultures que l’on est habilité à les évaluer, et même à les juger; en fonction, justement, des valeurs qui s’attachent à ce destin commun, et qui sont au-dessus de toutes nos civilisations, de toutes nos traditions, de toutes nos croyances. Car rien n’est plus sacré que le respect de l’être humain, la préservation de sa capacité à penser et à s’exprimer; et aussi la préservation de la planète qui le porte. (Le dérèglement du monde, p. 275)

Indeed, sometimes we must focus on and even celebrate difference. Highlighting conceptual difference is a necessary antidote to the cavalier ethnocentrism which has marked most of human history. Orientalism claimed for instance that others are just like us only lazier and less morally, aesthetically, or politically good. Similarly, the teachings of Islamic militancy are in the eyes of its adherents considered superior to the standards of mutual respect and tolerance common in liberal pluralistic societies. However, promoting the underlying ideology of Orientalism and Islamic militancy is an intellectual and moral indecency. A major synthesis is required here: celebrating difference should not degenerate into the grosser form of relativism, which culminate in an unbridgeable separatism, judging others as forcibly alien. In relating to others, the choice is not difference or similarity; it is difference and similarity (italics mine).

So, to recall the question of this study: people recognizably belonging to different cultures cannot be living in a different world; but they are likely to live differently in the same world.

Author: Dr. Paul Katsivelis
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Uppsala - Sweden
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