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Essay 1

The Possibilities and Limits of Coming to an Understanding Between Cultures¹



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Abstract

My presentation consists of three sections. In the title of the lecture, the term “understanding” occurs, in German “Verstehen,” which is embedded in the expression “coming to an understanding,” in German “Verständigung,” i.e., an understanding which includes the effort we need in order to achieve it. Accordingly, in the first section of my reflections, I would like to explain by means of a phenomenologically oriented philosophy, why such an effort is required at all, i.e., why the agreement between people does not come to be by itself. In the second section, I will concentrate upon the problem of intercultural coming to an understanding. I intend to show why there are still today fundamental obstacles standing in the way of such an understanding. In the third and final section of my reflections, I would like to explicate these principle difficulties, using the intercultural coming to an understanding between the Eastern and Western hemispheres as an example. I will then close my paper with the question how these difficulties might be overcome.

¹ I would like to express my thanks to James M. Thompson (Southern Illinois University at Carbondale) for translating this paper.

I.

I will begin with the first part of my presentation, i.e., the question: Why is the effort at all required to convince the others of one's own view and to be open to persuasion by others? The answer lies before us. The effort is required, because people take up different "positions." The concept of "position" originally has a spatial connotation and points to the fact that the body binds every human being to a location—the location from which he or she perceives something. To be sure, I can move from the location that I currently occupy to another one. If this location is within my field of vision, I can readily point it out and designate it as "there." However, if I went over "there," then I would call the location that I occupy, "here." Thus, there is a "here" that I can never leave. This "here" is inseparable from me and accompanies me, so to speak, everywhere I go—an observation with far reaching consequences stemming from the second volume of Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*.²

My "here," which cannot be lost, is the first thing that irrevocably separates me from others, because for their part they are bound to their "heres" as well. It is impossible that I should now take up the location of another, who in his or her inseparable here is "over there." Another aspect of my bodily connection to my ever present here is to have something irrevocably "at my back." I can turn around and direct my view towards something that I previously could not see, because it was lying behind me. However, I cannot change the fact that my inseparable here entails a region behind me that in principle remains hidden from my view. In the same way as my here, the region behind me shifts with my every movement regardless of the kind of movement it is. I carry this region, so to speak, on my back like a backpack that I can never take off.

These observations hold not only for my location literally—spatially—understood, but also for my location grasped in a wider sense, specifically for the realm of life to which I as well as others are respectively bound. We could use the term "world" to characterize this realm of life—not in the sense of all that there is, rather in the everyday sense, in which I can speak of "my world" or the world of another. I am irrevocably bound to my world in the same way that there is irrevocably a region behind me, which I can never view, as it were, from the front.

² E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. II. Buch, *Husserliana*, Bd. IV, ed. M. Biemel (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1952), pp. 56ff; for the English, cf. E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989)

The impossibility of viewing that “from the front” which is spatially behind me, holds for what lies temporally behind me as well. Certainly, there is a past to my life that I view, as it were, from the front: In expressly remembering something specifically in the past, it becomes the object of my attention. However, there is also another kind of past, in the same sense as the backpack that I wear but can never, as such, see. This past includes everything that has become a self-evident and established habit.

In much the same way that I can turn around to see what was lying invisibly at my back, I can become aware of one of my habits. However, the moment I do so, the habit begins to lose its habitual character; for the habit is defined through its determining my behavior without me being conscious thereof. In the moment that I direct my attention to this habit, it is in principle no longer a habit. I can alter or even give up many of my habits simply by making them the objects of my attention. However, it is impossible to cast off habituality as such. No matter what I do, the habituality remains irrevocably at my back in the same way as the spatial region behind me.

Now, my world and the respective worlds of others are deeply rooted in this very habituality. In more concrete terms, the world is the realm of life, in which I orient myself concerning my behavior. I know the context of the occurrences that I come across in my behavior, e.g., things, people, events, thoughts, institutions, etc. I am aware that I must go to the garage in order to drive my car somewhere. Generally speaking: I “know” that certain occurrences refer—by means of the sense they have for me—to other particular occurrences. Normally, this knowledge is available in such a way that I do not have to make myself aware of it. It is exactly this kind of “knowledge” that the habit makes possible. In this way my world is anchored in the corresponding habituality. Thereby, I carry inseparably this world with me; it forms an all encompassing and accompanying “here,” which I am incapable of leaving. The latter provides the answer to the first question why the effort is required to convince others and to be open to persuasion by others. This effort is necessary for establishing an agreement between people, because as a respective, all encompassing, and accompanying here, the worlds of people differ irrevocably.

II.

The customs or habits in which the worlds of people are rooted can be such that they are responsible for the differences between cultures. This leads me to the second section of my presentation. The advancing “globalization” of our times has brought with it that all over the world, untold numbers of people from different cultures come to an understanding with one another and achieve

agreements in their lives with respect to economics, politics, science, the media, sports, tourism etc. Certainly, different kinds of difficulties unavoidably arise, which have always made living together more complicated. However, it is a fact that intercultural collaborations take place all over the world today. It is inarguable that members from different cultures succeed in practice to reciprocally convince others of their views. Thus, the cultural differences seem to disappear more and more into one shared world, and the overcoming of difficulties in the effort of agreement appears to have become a mere practical task. Therefore, one might gain the impression that in principle, there are no insurmountable hurdles left in the realm of intercultural coming to an understanding. In this section I intend to show why I hold this intercultural coming to an understanding still to be a principle problem.

Before everything else, a distinction between two dimensions is necessary. The first is a dimension of practice, in which the coming to an understanding succeeds in a way observable worldwide. The second is a deeper lying dimension, where principle difficulties arise. In today's international business or political practice, when we achieve agreement, i.e., when the members of other cultures allow themselves to be persuaded away from their own opinions, this can almost always be attributed to common interests.

Eventually, these common interests are anchored in the tendency towards the preservation of life.³ The possibilities for the preservation of life range from the daily satisfaction of the needs of individual people to the preservation of humanity as such through the procreation and education of the offspring, i.e., preparing the upcoming generation to take over for the older generation. Utilizing a concept from Husserl's later manuscripts⁴ we could say: careful observation shows that the "generative" care also forms the basis for the everyday individual preservation of life; for the younger and older generations are mutually dependent upon one another. Conceived in this way, the "generative preservation of life" is what everyone has in common; it enables the intercultural coming to an understanding in the global practice of today's living-together.

³ In business or politics, these interests can be so basic as to touch upon the mere continuation of our existence. However, in science, the media, sports, and tourism, these interests refer to activities that satisfy wishes and tendencies surmounting the mere continuation of our existence. To express it in terms of the beginning of Aristotle's *Politics*, it either concerns "merely living" or "the good life;" however, one should not overlook the fact that a "good life" is still a way of "life." In both cases, the intercultural agreement rests upon the common aspiration of its participants to continue life.

⁴ Cf. Anthony J. Steinbock: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press 1995) and my "Generative Experience of Time," in *The Many Faces of Time*, eds. J. Brough and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishers 2000).

Like animals, human beings are subject to the necessity of the preservation of life. Due to the previously mentioned commonality, the impression can arise that it is from the very beginning impossible for intercultural coming to an understanding to run into fundamental difficulties. It seems in every case possible, because all human beings, regardless of the culture they come from, share commonalities regarding their behavior as living beings. However, such optimism would rely upon a naturalistic fallacy. Even when we correspond with our behavior to the necessities that nature dictates—from eating and drinking to reproducing offspring—we do so in the unavoidable form of cultural customs or habits. There is no human behavior that would be “purely natural” without culture. This is clearly seen in the basic presupposition of the generative preservation of life as observed in the generational cycle of birth and death. Through closer inspection we encounter here the deeper dimension of intercultural coming to an understanding, where difficulties can arise that appear insurmountable.

The concrete experiences of birth and death and all that they entail is accompanied by a phenomenon, which the German language refers to as “Stimmung.” In English, this is roughly captured by the terms “mood,” “attunement,” and even “atmosphere.” In East Asia this term is equated with something like “quifen” in Chinese or “kibun” in Japanese and Korean. There is a “mood” of everyday life, upon which habituality rests that in turn is responsible for the world at my back. For my world can only be rooted in habituality because it is connected to the fundamental confidence that the world will continue to exist. This confidence is completely self-evident and normally remains unnoticed; it is not founded upon theoretical knowledge, rather this confidence imbues us in the form of the fundamental mood that pervades our everyday life.

The experiences associated with birth and death inevitably break through this mood. A person’s death means the descent of the world that ascended with his or her birth. Thus, the continuity of the ongoing existence of my world, which I take for granted in my everyday mood, is disrupted by the moods associated with birth and death. Such moods range in form from the exuberant joy of a yearned for child to the despair accompanying the death of a loved one. In between these lie love, reverence, astonishment, terror, anxiety, and other such “feelings”—Heidegger referred to these moods as “fundamental moods.”⁵

⁵ Cf. my “Fundamental Moods and Heidegger’s Critique of Contemporary Culture” in *Reading Heidegger. Commemorations*, ed. J. Sallis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1993), and my “Intercultural Understanding and the Role of Europe” in *The Monist*, January 1995.

These “feelings” do not simply appear from out of nowhere, rather they lie dormant within each of us. In the same way that the earth’s surface suppresses the power of an underlying volcano, our everyday mood prevents other moods, welling up from the depths, from coming to the surface. We can only exist with these deep and latent moods by letting customs or habits arise in our living-together, and above all customs or habits of ethos and religion, which enable the integration of the moods that can surface at any given time into the “normal” course of life, i.e., the course of life regulated in a particular way.

The deep moods are the source of the most intensive and longest-lasting awareness of the belonging together of human beings. Thus, they can form the fertile soil for customs or habits upon which the commonality of an entire cultural world is based. It depends upon the constellation of deep moods, which customs or habits, fundamental to a culture, arise. Such constellations of moods and their related customs or habits are contingent. The factors influencing the latter include first and foremost the historical situation of the community of human beings, who inhabit a particular region of the earth, but also the genetic endowments of its members, and not lastly the geographical position of the region and its corresponding climate. The culturally instituting habits that are rooted in the deep moods span the entire spectrum of living-together. They range from bodily behavior as well as phonetic, grammatical, and rhetorical possibilities of speech to the currently prevailing forms of living-together, i.e., the “customs or practices” of a society—the *êthos* as understood by Aristotle. In the reciprocal effort to convince others in a situation concerning a shared matter, the practices play the most significant role, because we all have them at our backs as the background that determines us in our relationships to others, whether desired or not.

The cultural worlds differ fundamentally from one another with respect to the prevailing constellation of deep moods and the corresponding customs or habits. Serious difficulties in the intercultural coming to an understanding arise due to the ambivalence of the deep moods. The deep moods call forth not only the most intensive feeling of belonging together, but they also have the characteristic of “rendering us speechless”; in this way coming to an understanding can be impeded or even prevented. Our everyday practices do not normally allow the possible disruptions by the deep moods to surface. However, this does not mean that these moods simply vanish, and therefore the danger constantly exists that an abyssal divide erupts between cultural worlds due to their basic customs or habits, which are rooted in the deep moods. An impression could arise, which is diametrically opposed to the previously mentioned naturalistic optimism regarding the intercultural coming to an understanding. It appears now as if the effort of reciprocal persuasion by

members of different cultures would be doomed to failure or—to put it in Huntington’s words—as if a clash of the cultures were inevitable.

III.

The most obvious example today are the difficulties between the Western and the Islamic countries that belong to the Eastern hemisphere of our world. For this reason, I would like to explicate the general thoughts developed here by means of an example concerning the coming to an understanding between the East and the West, thus arriving at the third section of my presentation.

In the Eastern half of the world, not only in Islam, but in East Asia as well, the family is taken to be the fundamental form of living-together. The society is structured according to the standards that the family has set forth. This paradigmatic role of the family is no coincidence, rather it is accounted for by the preservation of life, which I have already mentioned as the basic motivating force behind all of our interests. The great cultures of history, including Europe, were based upon the notion that it was the same realm of life, wherein the individual preservation of life was cared for through the daily satisfaction of needs and wherein the generative preservation of life through the procreation and education of children took place.

Aristotle was the first to philosophically thematize the dual task of the family. In attempting to reach a definition of the living-together in the Polis or city-state, he inquired into the presuppositions of its origin. To that time, the city-state was already democratically constituted. The “citizens,” i.e., those members of the Polis considered equals in the freedom of making decisions together, formed the ruling body of the population. For Aristotle, the fundamental presupposition for the origin of the Polis thusly conceived is the *oïkos* or “house.” The *oïkos* does not only comprise the building, but also the “household,” i.e., the form in which the family lives together—the family in its pre-modern form, not the small family of the contemporary Western society, rather the family wherein three generations live together. In the previously referred to dual sense, the “house” designated the location for the preservation of life.

The necessity of the preservation of life makes certain rules necessary, and it must be insured through force that these rules are followed. This force presupposes a hierarchy; for there must be a member of the family who exercises this force. Whether this force comes to be exercised by the man-of-the-house in patriarchal cultures or in matriarchal cultures by the mother or grandmother is irrelevant to my reflections. Consequently, inequality rules within the *oïkos*. Although the citizens of the democratic Polis hold to the

principle of equality, Aristotle characterizes the *oikos* as the presupposition of the citizen Polis. For the democratic experience of equality is prepared for within the family in two ways. First of all, the man and wife in a marriage represent the core of the family and are given an equal status insofar as they are reciprocally dependent upon one another for the generative preservation of life, i.e., the procreation of offspring. Therefore, according to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, friendship between spouses is possible. A similar relation between the spouses can later in antiquity be seen in St. Paul's letters. Secondly, in the family, according to Aristotle, the children are equal in that they are all siblings. As the location of the generative preservation of life, the family is ambivalent with regard to equality and inequality.

Because of this ambivalence, the conceptions of the family in the Eastern and Western hemispheres could continue to move away from each other over time. The inequality that was experienced paradigmatically in the family was seen by non-European cultures as that which was, so to speak, natural. For that reason, the hierarchical structure of the family was, as a rule, carried over to the society as a whole. The classic example of this was the ethics of Confucianism in traditional China. Facing the cultural dominance of the principle of inequality, the democratic equality of citizens must appear, as it were, contrary to nature, because the commonality of living-together rests upon the combative controversy between the various opinions that the citizens hold. This controversy is not only permissible but constitutive for democracy.

In stark contrast, the commonality of living-together in the East Asian cultures is—from their origin in China—not based upon controversy. Rather, it rests upon harmony, which is guaranteed by the hierarchical structures that are modeled after the family. Such a harmony, however, could only be accepted as a model for customs or habits, because a particular constellation of deep moods necessitated them. I would like to leave it to the East Asian philosophers to adequately describe and analyze the constellation of their cultural region. However, as a Western philosopher I can attempt to outline the constellation of deep moods that put the West on the path to a human rights oriented democracy emerging from ancient Greece, and to the modern Western conception of the family that is closely related to the latter.

This mood constellation was originally determined through *thaumázein* — the astonishment from which, according to Plato and Aristotle, the spirit of philosophy and science sprang forth. In the deep mood of astonishment, a “wonder” overcomes man; the wonder that the world is “there” rather than not. To this extent, a receptivity to the experience of the world belongs to *thaumázein*. However, this receptivity does not remain passive. Since it motivates an active curiosity concerning the multiple appearances of the world—a curiosity that leads to science—this receptivity brings man to a new kind of consciousness of the possibilities that he or she has as an individual.

Yet, it is precisely this self-consciousness of the individual that also becomes apparent in the reciprocal recognition of the members of the Greek Polis as citizens with equal rights. The encounter of the citizens is determined by a mood, from which an attitude results; and it is through this attitude that the citizens give space for the appearance of the individual other in the public sphere of the Polis. The Greeks called this mood and attitude *aidós*, which means “modest awe.” With this attitude, the ground for the modern respect for “human dignity” and the human rights based upon the latter was prepared in the ancient world.⁶

The development that led to the modern era was above all motivated by a tension, which resulted from the mood of astonishment. The research that derived from astonishment insisted upon solid and reliable results. However, the receptive attitude of astonishment maintains a flexibility concerning the unforeseeable appearances of the world, thus causing a certain insecurity. This insecurity intensified during the Voluntarism of later medieval thought. The deep mood of this thinking, which determined the entire European world of that time, was fed by the Christian experience of unlimited power of the biblical God. The insecurity resulting from the overwhelming power of the biblical God had the consequence that in the transition to the modern era the ancient striving for lasting knowledge transformed into a pursuit by the sciences for an absolutely certain knowledge. In order to attain such certainty Descartes developed the methodological doubt.

The consequence of the methodological doubt is a new epoch-making use of the old concept of *subiectum*. In pre-modern ontology, this word, which is the Latin translation of the Aristotelian concept of *hypokeímenon*, designated that which underlies or bears the determinations. In the Cartesian search for absolute certainty, what appears beyond all doubt is human consciousness as the genuine bearer of all determinations. Thus, from the old *subiectum* came the “subject” in the modern sense, i.e., the human being as the “lord and owner of nature”—as Descartes characterized it.

The dominance of the “subject” was already prefigured in the domain of the ancient Greek language, when the Stoics developed the European grammar, based upon Aristotle’s thought. In this grammar, the *subiectum* came to designate that component of a proposition to which predicates were attributed. Consequently, the subject became the bearer of all sentences and therefore of language as such. Language, in turn, plays a special role among the habitualities that are rooted in the deep moods. For language is that

⁶ Cf. my “The Ethos of Democracy from a Phenomenological Point of View” in *Self-Awareness, Temporality, and Alterity. Central Topics in Phenomenology*, ed. D. Zahavi (Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishers 1998).

habituality which first grants the commonality of all human beings in a cultural world.

The fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western cultures is clearly manifested in that the Japanese language—with Japan being in some respects still the dominant force in the East—does not know a subject. If I want to formulate the Japanese sentence “Mr. Held came to Prague,” I would say “Heluto san wa Puraha e kimashita.” Strictly speaking, this sentence is not a statement about the subject “Heluto san” (“Mr. Held”). Rather, this sentence is constructed analogously to the so-called “impersonal statements” of the Indo-European languages, such as “It was hot.” This statement designates a condition or an event in the past. The essential component of the Japanese example is “kimashita,” and means similarly that a past event has taken place, i.e., a coming to Prague.

In the Indo-European languages, we can add to the statement “It is hot” an element that conveys what the occurrence concerns in a variety of ways, e.g., “In Prague, it is hot” or “To me, it is hot.” The phrase at the beginning of the Japanese example, “Heluto san wa Puraha,” is comparable in that it points out a concern. The term “wa” following “Heluto san,” “Mr. Held,” means something like “concerning.” Therefore, the whole sentence states that a coming to Prague took place concerning Mr. Held. In principle, all Japanese sentences are constructed in this fashion. The structure of this language harbors a particular hierarchy between the events or states and the individuals. What primarily and everywhere takes place, are events and states in the shared world, and secondarily, everything that is concerned becomes incorporated into the latter. The ones concerned can also be a single person or a community of people.

The ones concerned can be examined with respect to how well or poorly they fit in with the events or states. If they fit in well, there is “harmony.”⁷ The fact that those concerned can be considered with respect to their ability to integrate, points to a deep mood, through which harmony becomes the fundamental norm of the culturally founding customs or habits. Indeed, harmony has often been called the truly definitive cultural model of East Asia. Yet, a deep mood of the need for harmony and the basic habituality that is rooted in the latter—therefore granting the individual integration into the primary events or states—exclude from the very beginning that the individual could become a subject in a grammatical or ontological sense.

Evolving from the late medieval mood of insecurity, the being-subject or subjectivity as the principle of thought and action prevails in the modern Western age. Consequently, the first “declaration” of human rights becomes

⁷ The Greek term *harmonía* originally meant “integrative gathering.”

possible during the Enlightenment, the human rights that later advance to the foundation of modern democracy. At the same time, the following happens: In ancient Europe the equality between spouses was already recognized to a certain extent, as can be seen in Aristotle and in St. Paul. But now, it turns into the equality of two “subjects” united in the emotion of love, and their marriage is grounded upon a contract, into which the spouses enter as responsible individual subjects. Prior to the modern Western development, other institutions, e.g., the parents or marriage brokers, were responsible for the arrangement of marriages in most cultures. In the last three centuries, the entire conception of the Western family has been strongly influenced by the modern dominance of subjectivity. As a result, the original task of *oïkos*, the generative preservation of life, started to lose its significance and increasingly does so—with many consequences, e.g., the drastic increase in the rate of divorce in Western countries and in those countries that more and more approximate Western lifestyles. I do not criticize this fact; I only describe it.

IV.

It is, therefore, no wonder that the East, be it Islamic states or China or its cultural surroundings, accuses the West of the growing destruction of the family. The example of the family shows particularly well that, in the extreme case, the culturally defining customs or habits can appear irreconcilable and risk the danger of enmity between different cultures. Thus, the question arises with which I wish to close my essay: Confronted with the divergence of culturally defining customs or habits that in turn are rooted in the constellation of deep moods, is there a way of avoiding this danger?

Some schools of contemporary philosophy believe they further the intercultural coming to an understanding in that they attempt to ground universal norms that are independent of history and that overarch all cultures, e.g., human rights—the idea being to derive democracy from these norms. The previously mentioned naturalistic optimism concerning the intercultural coming to an understanding appeals to naturally determined necessities common to all human beings. Analogously, the normativistic theorists believe that inherent difficulties in the intercultural coming to an understanding can be excluded by going back to particular mental necessities shared by all humans. In both cases, the appeal to necessity rests, whether acknowledged or not, on the ideal of a “compelling” proof, similar to those found in mathematics.

However, the issue of human rights shows this path to be an illusion. They presuppose the value of the individual; a value that is to be protected and that is based upon the modern Western conception of the “subject.” This ontological conception cannot be separated from the grammatical assumption

of a subjectum in the sentence. During the Enlightenment, the conception of a universal grammar arose, and it was taken for granted that this would be oriented towards the structure of Indo-European languages. In the Fourth Logical Investigation, Husserl took up this notion as well. From the perspective of such a conception, the “subject-less” sentence structure of the Japanese language, must in some way be deemed deficient. In my previous example, the concern “Heluto san wa” is taken to “actually” be the subject of the sentence. The normative foundation of human rights relies inevitably on the presupposition of the human “subject.” Thereby, a Western way of thinking becomes the mandatory template for all cultures.

Only if the subjectum were an indispensable structural component in the habituality of all cultural worlds could a normative form of argumentation that builds upon the latter convince the cultures of the East of the validity of human rights. In this way, they could be motivated to take over modern democracy, which is based upon the human rights, not merely in a superficial sense. Rather, they would appropriate it as an inner attitude and way of living-together in a community. But in this way, the mental compulsion that is accomplished by means of normative argumentation is nothing other than a cultural imperialism of the West toward the East, an imperialism that succeeds the earlier political imperialism.

For this reason the question is: How is it possible to convince the East of the acceptability of ordinary Western customs or habits in a way other than to appeal to supposedly universal norms? The example of the family provides the way to the answer. It is no coincidence that the family in the sense of *oïkos* can also be found in East Asia and Islam as the location of the generative preservation of life. The family holds the previously mentioned elements of equality. However, due to the governing constellation of deep moods, these could not come into play in the East, thus remaining almost completely latent. Through intercultural dialogue, the West could free these elements from their hiddenness. Only in this way, an approach free from cultural imperialism could be developed in order to win over the Eastern partners in dialogue to the principle of equality in democracy, and consequently to the human rights that ground democracy.

The example demonstrates that convincing the members of another culture becomes possible if it derives from interculturably comparable customs or habits related to the generative preservation of life and it brings to light the possibilities of experience, which lie within the corresponding customs or habits of the other culture, but remained concealed due to the constellation of deep moods. This exchange does not apply in only one direction, i.e., from West to East, but also vice versa. In the interaction with other worlds, it is in principle possible for every cultural world to free the other side’s latent possibilities of experience with respect to the partially coinciding generative

customs or habits. It is possible as well to “convincingly propose” to the other side to be open to encounter such a possibility. However, such a proposal lacks the insistency of a mathematical proof. There is no scientific certainty for the success of intercultural coming to an understanding in the way that naturalistic and normativistic optimism has in mind.
