Habermas and the Universe of Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the role that culture plays in the web of people’s relationships. It aims at exploring the possibilities of intercultural discourse in the universe of cultures by appropriating the contributions of Jürgen Habermas’s discourse ethics. It would be argued that a positive outlook on the plurality of cultures can help nurture one’s cultural heritage, and can at the same time challenge and break through ethnocentrism.

KEY WORDS: Culture, Discourse, Habermas, Multiculturalism, Self-understanding

Culture is in some way the universe which a community creates for itself, with its representation of the past and its vision of the future, its conception of the world, its system of social relations, its habits and beliefs, its spontaneous reactions and its characteristics behaviors and its original way of communicating and working. (Pacelli 166–67)

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturality is where and who we are. This situation invites us to reflect on the proper kind of attitude in response to it. There is a need to rethink the way we regard cultural diversity, a need to change our attitudes in the way we relate to the different cultures we find ourselves with, in order to arrive at “a renewed common world” (Arendt 196). We can achieve this by engaging “in a process of self-reflection” (Habermas, “Struggles” 120).¹ Echoing Christine Firer Hinze’s thought-provoking

¹Apathy, discrimination along racial or gender lines, and ethnic cleansing have inflicted so much violence against humanity. Think about the Nazi regime that caused the death of millions of Jews, the ethnic cleansing that happened in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and
note, Edgar Javier enjoins everyone “to have a dialogical engagement with the signs of the times” by “moving away from archaic dichotomies. Instead of talking about dichotomies, today we talk about intersecting ideas and insights.” The aim is the “birth of a wholistic perspective” (“Interculturality” 37–38) in the way we regard cultures, for who are we but people that “inter-exist”?

This discussion aims to explore the possibilities of intercultural discourse in the universe of cultures by appropriating the contributions of Jürgen Habermas’s discourse ethics. The following questions will guide the progress of the discussion: (1) What does “communicative relation” mean for Jürgen Habermas? (2) What elements make up the so-called “universe of cultures,” and how do they promote intercultural discourse? (3) What challenges face the universe of cultures on the way to communicative relations? (4) How can a person, living in a multicultural society with others, flourish in his cultural beliefs and practices if he lives in a society that has an isolationist view of cultures?

There are three different approaches towards the plurality of cultures. One of these would claim that a person in order to be faithful to his culture should not entertain claims coming from other cultures that may go against his, but should rather assert his own culture and disregard the other. Habermas says that this kind of perception may result in fundamentalism: “The more the tendencies to self-assertion” the more one “takes on a fundamentalist and separatist character” (“Struggles” 118). This stance is not open to the plurality of cultures, but rather is a kind of disinterestedness and discontent with other truth claims. One coming from this point of view reacts with aloofness towards others, is suspicious of what others subscribe to and clings to exclusivism as the way to maintain the purity of one’s own.

A second approach is to look at the truth claims of other cultures, embodied in their beliefs, practices, worldviews, and interpretations, and treat them as if they were better than one’s own, even to the extent of assuming that the other is the culture par excellence. This other extreme attitude is tantamount to despising one’s own cultural inheritance and origins by doubting the validity of one’s own cultural claims. Someone taking this stance embraces other cultures and turns away from one’s own.

The third approach, the most positive one, is to be welcoming in the midst of a plurality of cultures. One allows others to hold on to their cul-

as late as 2011, the genocidal war waged by the armed forces of President Bashir against Christian communities in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. These and many other crimes against humanity should make us reflect on how we treat peoples from different cultures.
tures, while holding fast to one’s own. At best, this stance makes room for life to prosper among cultures, which is to say to live in solidarity with one another without necessarily putting aside or stepping on others’ cultures. This attitude helps bring about intercultural discourse, meaning an honest communicative interaction among diverse cultures. One’s attitude thus is very crucial with regard to culture: it is the door that either opens to greater cultural sensibility and appreciation of what others can offer for the interest of all, or blocks prosperous relationships among cultures.

Let us now discuss Habermas’s communicative theory and its promise for intercultural discourse.

COMMUNICATIVE RELATIONS: ASPECTS AND GOALS

People have from the very beginning fervently desired to live in a community where everybody feels a sense of belongingness. It is along this line that individuals like Jürgen Habermas2 have been trying to create a rational community where better ways of interaction among peoples, though coming from diverse perspectives, become possible. Habermas espoused a paradigm that may be the one best suited to respond to issues of living in today’s multicultural societies, namely the need for rational communication among different people, cultural inclusivity, cultural tolerance, and other socio-political concerns. In this regard, Habermas’s communicative action is significant in exploring the possibilities of intercultural discourse. Given the current global concern on interfaith dialogue, interreligious communication, and intersubjectivity, intercultural discourse grounded on the Habermasian philosophy of communicative theory needs careful examination. Let us then proceed to an exploration of Habermas’s theory of communicative discourse.

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2 Jürgen Habermas is one of the leading figures in contemporary socio-political philosophy. His major influence is the German intellectual tradition from Kant to Hegel to Marx, but he has also been associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theorists (which include among their ranks, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Marcuse). Habermas builds on these strands of thought, but, in response to the pessimism of the later Frankfurt School and the cynicism of postmodernism, he claims that late modernity has much to offer for the progress of human society as long as one breaks away from “subjective-centered reason” or “instrumental rationality” (Weber and Marx). Instead, one must become open to communicative action/reason which is not driven by predictable outcomes but instead relies on the “intersubjectivity of the mutual understanding of intentions,” which would then lead towards critical self-reflection or emancipation.
According to Habermas the communicative relation is the process by which persons establish social interaction and whose responses are “to be influenced solely by the force of the better argument” and not egoistic motivations (Justification 31; Reason 86). It involves exchanges of perspectives on a given situation, which calls on the capacity of the persons involved to accept a rationally and mutually binding position. The communicative process seeks to answer where and how sincere interaction becomes possible, and thus locates the way to reach an understanding among participants in a discourse. In Habermas’s view, the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions. (Reason 285–86)

Communicative interaction therefore is a process of coming to a self-understanding and to a social transformation, which involves setting aside individualistic and arbitrary motivations. Every participant in a discourse is thus tasked to advance the collective interest. Whatever takes place in communicative interactions is oriented towards deliberation and assessment among the participants in order “to reach an understanding” (Habermas, Moral Consciousness 135) in the midst of their varied claims. An understanding attitude in this sense is very much needed as diverse perspectives of the participants are welcomed and weighed through the rigor of argumentation. A harmonious exchange of views, one that is without coercion, falsification and force, allows for an intelligent response to emerge on “all questions that relate to the conceptions of the good life, or a life that is not misspent” (Habermas, “Struggles” 122). Discourse opens a space where people can truly express to each other their concerns, sentiments and ideas free from threats. Participants in the discourse then have to genuinely commit themselves to cooperate and to align themselves to the truth being pursued.

Communicative action seeks “truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness or authenticity” (Habermas, Philosophical Discourse 115). Truth is the reason behind the communicative relation, the reason why people enter into consensus. Consensus is thus rationally constituted for it emerges principally from an unrestrained and freely-willed discourse. As Rick Roderick cogently puts it,
In communication we attempt to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus concerning both what is and what ought to be. The binding character of norms can be explained only upon the supposition that the consensus arrived at is constraint free and represent the common good. (79, 88)

The communicative relation leads persons into a universal “consensus on values” which is objectively rational (“Struggles” 136). Consensus here is to be taken as an “idealizing supposition” and not as a requirement of communicative relation. It is hoped that every discourse leads to consensus or mutual understanding, but this is not the end goal, for consensus can just be another opening for further conversation “given the differentiated forms of life characteristic of pluralistic societies” (Habermas, “Genealogical Analysis” 39). Nonetheless, Habermas’s deliberative approach is optimistically oriented to “regulate interactions between any subjects capable of speech and action” in the public realm (“The Nation” 138). It strives to reach mutual agreement among persons with competing claims. Communicative action goes beyond merely asserting one’s claim; it is rather the recognition that everybody is capable of using his perspective as a bridge to the other.

Consensus, as pointed above, goes through a rigorous process. In his note to Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Thomas McCarthy remarks that since “claims can be criticized, there is a possibility of identifying and correcting mistakes, that is, of learning from them” (xiii). Claims presented by social actors in a discourse can be met with disagreements; as such, they would need redemption. The validity of claims, in this respect, have to be open to criticism, to evaluation in terms of their “intelligibility (or comprehensibility), truth (regarding the propositional content), justifiability (or appropriateness in terms of the norms invoked), and truthfulness (or sincerity in the sense that the speaker does not intend to deceive the listener)” which “are embedded in every speech-act” (Dietz 122). Claims are not dogmas, but rather constructs that time and again have to be re-evaluated. As such, they are not absolutes that automatically and perfectly answer every concern in the public sphere. They are open to critique and re-assessment, which facilitate a better response to any given situation that persons may find themselves in. Continuous effort is needed to clarify and ascertain the validity of the content of one’s claims. Dissent and disagreements are thus necessary components for progress to happen and in order to establish a rationally-founded claim.

Communication, however, can be used for one’s selfish interest. Habermas calls this “instrumental-strategic action,” which is nothing but a
systematically distorted form of communication. Habermas warns that this type of communication is nothing but egoistic: communication here is pursued to implement and impose one’s own motive to the detriment of what others consider is worth listening to and considering. In this case, communicative discourse is set aside. Habermas stresses that there is no conversation and no mutual co-operation at all among the participants in a systematically distorted communication:

We call an action oriented to success instrumental when we consider it under the aspect of following technical rules of action and assess the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events. We call an action oriented to success strategic when we consider it under the aspect of following rules of rational choice and assess the efficacy of influencing the decisions of a rational opponent. (Reason 285)

On one hand, instrumental action is “exclusively non-social,” for its “success depends on following technical rules” in order to arrive at a particular goal (Niemi 517). Rules or a ready-made framework determine an action: it is only by following step-by-step the given rules that the preferred outcome of an action can be achieved. Hence this kind of action is non-social because there is no room for interactive communication and learning. It then defeats one of the purposes of communication, namely that persons develop into individuals by being socially interactive. As Habermas puts it,

Only as social members of cultural communities can they develop into persons. Only on the path of socialization, growing into an intersubjectively shared universe of meanings and practices, can persons develop into distinct individuals. (“Equal Treatment” 17)

Strategic action, on the other hand, attempts to successfully influence or subvert the decision of other social actors by maligning them. It treats others as competitors or as threats to the establishment of an exclusivist plan. To coercively get others’ “yes” or “no” on a certain claim is to overpower others and deprive them of their own will and reason. Strategic action exerts every available means to influence others, such as ostensive

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3Systematically distorted communication is an established form of deception that tries to persuade a person to assume a task or decision. It therefore hinders the emergence of genuine relationships and societal transformation. Communication of this kind is thus thoroughly built upon one’s selfish or egotistic interest at the expense of a rationally driven consensus and the common good.
request, force, or deceit. It is a kind of super-imposition, for an undertaking is achieved not through rational discourse but through a coercive manner. Communication is thus used in a deceitful way so that participants in a discourse comply without any complaint whatsoever.

It is evident that communication can be an avenue to rational discourse among people of diverse views regarding communal concerns, but it can also hinder any attempt to a rationally-driven communicative process. Habermas’s communicative action attempts to treat issues in a genuinely rational manner in order to arrive at some mutually binding stance. It suggests that consensus-building can take place even in the midst of competing claims and perspectives as long as everyone is in pursuit of objectivity or truth. With communicative action, the motivations and egoistic interests hidden behind instrumental-strategic action can be identified and broken through, thus allowing for a rational discourse to take place. Communicative action then is a better position for intercultural discourse to happen. Now we must establish how communicative relation becomes the key to intercultural discourse in the universe of cultures.

THE UNIVERSE OF CULTURES:
THE SPHERE OF INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSE

The universe of cultures is the space in which meanings and values, habits and beliefs transform, evolve and are shared. It is a constellation of those systems that allow people to live and become who they are. The universe of cultures presupposes that recognition of the other, mutual understanding, mutual learning, and self-understanding—the marks of communicative relations—are of paramount importance for the possibility of intercultural discourse.

Quest for Recognition of the Other

The universe of culture is where persons, regardless of their cultural backgrounds are motivated by the spirit of solidarity to reach out towards each other and aim at a common action on issues—whether social, political, economic, cultural, religious, etc.—that confront them as a people. Habermas contends that it “does not exclude any subject capable of speech and action who can make relevant contributions” in a discourse (“Genealogical Analysis” 41). Everyone is enjoined to express one’s thoughts or views. A person looks at his claims not as superior, absolute, or the most valid of all, but instead as one among the many perspectives open to rational
argumentation in the pursuit of common good. The communicative participants do not necessarily surrender their views, but together recognize each other as having something to contribute to the process of discourse that can help promote the collective interest. It will be useful if one does not think of himself as better than the other, but rather acknowledges that one does not have the monopoly on truth or knowledge, and that everyone participating in the discourse has to come up with an objective agreement. This openness affirms that views, perspectives and suggestions other than one’s own are generated also by the other.

Intercultural discourse is possible, in this case, for there is no place for self-centeredness in the universe of cultures. It is committed rather to the flourishing of all the participants in the discourse. It does not exclude others in participating and expressing their thoughts, views or aspirations. As UNESCO declares, participating in discourse and expressing one’s view therein “are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent” (Art.4). Communicative participants must commit themselves to recognizing the other. This right is embedded in every culture, and thus needs to be explicitly acknowledged and honored.

Emmanuel Levinas writes that “the very fact of being in a conversation (discours) consists in recognizing in the other a right over (one’s) egoism, and hence in justifying oneself” (Totality 4). The person evokes from the other participants in the discourse the respect due to him. One cannot disregard the right of the other to be recognized. It is the responsibility of one to regard the other in the way he regards himself; it is treating the other as one’s self. It is thus fundamental for intercultural discourse to recognize the inherent value of every interlocutor. Levinas explains that “Responsibility, the signification which is non-indifference, goes one way (est a sens unique), from me to the other” (Otherwise 215–16). The relationship of participants in the discourse process then should not be clouded by indifference. It must rather be transparent so that one does not have to conceal his intentions and be deceptive in his speech acts.

Furthermore, the recognition of the other as a point of departure in intercultural discourse cultivates the “awareness of the unity of human-kind and the development of intercultural exchanges” (UNESCO). It is only by recognizing the significant role of every participant in the discourse process can there be growth in their relationship. This recognition strengthens a sense of belongingness whereby everyone in the discourse feels that they have an important role to play in the attainment of mutual understanding. It awakens everyone to the realization that no one lives for himself. Life is all about sharing, communication, integration, and
solidarity with others. Recognition initiates the movement from exclusion to inclusion.

Differences in views among the participants are a given. They can, however, be regarded as providing the potential for solidarity for they can be a source of effective interrelations in which the participants in the discourse can strive to recognize each other’s assumptions and views.

Ahmad Jalali explains that in a “genuine dialogue we do not attempt to discover our partner’s weakness, rather, we endeavor to reveal the true strength of his opinions” (18). This entails that participants in a discourse should not only be ready for rational argumentation in order to justify the sincerity, truthfulness and meaningfulness of a claim, but also be free and willing to listen to each other. Participation in a discourse then should not be reinforced by coercion or motivated by egoistic inclination. Genuine discourse happens when participants freely and willingly cooperate in the search for objective truth and meaning.

The task of every participant in a discourse then is to be attentive in order to understand, grasp and absorb the meaning or truth implicit in the position of the other, and to not just let this significant moment slip way. Ahmad Jalali puts forward the idea that “in each dialogue we have to consider some cognizance of the truth for the ‘other,’ as well as some contribution to it by the ‘other,’ otherwise dialogue is meaningless” (24). Intercultural discourse, in this case, becomes fruitful when the participants are aware that they are all co-travellers in the search for meaningful life in the universe of cultures. Intercultural discourse can only be humanizing when there is proper recognition and respect among all the participants.

**Quest for Mutual Understanding**

The universe of cultures is the abode of mutual understanding. Habermas observes that fundamentalists or isolationists insist on their worldview as dogmatic, that is, “they leave no space for reflection on their relationship to those other world views with which they share the same universe of discourse and against whose competing validity claims they can assert themselves only with reasons” (“Struggles” 133). Language, cultural differences, various ideologies and creeds of people, plus the experience of racial discrimination, crime, war, and terrorism have blurred any hope for inclusivity. As Habermas puts it:

Discrimination or disrespect, non-presence in the public arenas of society or a collective lack of self-respect: all these are indicators of an
Indeed these experiences have become sources of division among people. They have impeded people from coming together to share their thoughts about life—a life that is dreamed together, where everybody can find peace, where they can be most fully themselves without fear and apprehension. Contemporary society has become too complex to be so easily understood. Just think about the different aspects making up today’s society: economy, politics, culture, and religion. What do people think about them? Are they sources of unity and mutual understanding, or have they become reasons why some overpower and manipulate others? Have they opened avenues for people to come together, or have they actually erected divisive walls? One can easily be disappointed with contemporary society, but it can also be a source of inspiration to work for a better communal life.

This is a great challenge for intercultural discourse. How willing are the participants to venture into a meaningful existence where everybody can live freely? In this regard, recognition of the other, as discussed above, becomes the basis for mutual understanding between the communicative participants. Habermas strongly suggests that “all persons must be recognized as members of ethical communities integrated around different conceptions of the good” (“Struggles” 133).

The world is sick because of a lack of recognition and respect for the other. There has been too much emphasis on individualistic cravings, to the detriment of the good of the other. How can a false promise or an insult to another person wield mutual respect? To seek to influence others by deceiving them is not expressive of the ideals of the communicative relation. With such a situation, the very goal of a speech act to reach understanding is set aside.

Intercultural discourse is not simply a way to make sure that one’s claim gets across to the other. It is not just about clearly expressing one’s point. As a process, it enables the participants to reach a mutual understanding and to act collectively. Such is discourse: it leads participants to understand each other’s perspectives without coercion or the use of force, of demeaning threats, or of false promises. Instead, it explores ways for complementarity. Otherwise, the conversation falls prey to untruthful ideas, or at worst, disappears completely. It is then apt to echo the recommendation of Edgar Javier: “maintaining mutual respect for each other is badly needed for all who willingly commit themselves to dialogue” (Dialogue 158, 160).
Quest for Interactive Learning

The universe of cultures is also the sphere where people learn from each other. Habermas notes: “In the defensive slogan ‘the boat is full’ one hears a lack of willingness to take the perspective of the other side” (“Struggles” 133). Clinging exclusively to one’s claims, beliefs, ideas, and perceptions is always a great temptation for any individual. It can stop a person from learning from others, and has the power to lead the person to become inward-centered, to think only of himself as the intelligence par excellence so that he has no need for the presence of others. Yet, this is what discourse in the universe of cultures challenges and transforms. Discourse awakens in individuals their capacity to learn from others’ perspectives. Learning from others is a healthy attitude that offers ways to validate, complement, clarify, and augment one’s claims. It broadens one’s horizon and deepens understanding. Complementarity becomes very evident here as the participants in the discourse learn from each other’s new ways of being and thinking. One’s own perspective, however promising it is, flourishes only insofar as it is in the context of other perspectives.

Collective insights emerge and are enriched when persons learn from each other, leading the interactive participants from their narrow perspectives and uncritical opinions towards comprehensive and rationally justified views, and thus to the reality of intellectual diversity. A perspective about an issue does not have to be one-sided if communicative participants are neither focused on their claims nor indifferent to that of the others. One can truly value and understand one’s own assertions, cultural beliefs, and heritage when one has a deep respect for and is interested in what others claim as well. One has to go beyond simply appreciating the claim of the other, and instead must genuinely make the effort to learn from what others can offer.

Quest for Self-Understanding

The epiphanic moment of learning about oneself takes place in the universe of cultures. Habermas argues: “Through socialization processes,” persons are “composed at any given time” and “embody cultural forms of life in which they have developed their identity. They form the nodal points as it were, in an ascriptive network of cultures and traditions, of intersubjectively shared contexts of life and experience” (“Struggles” 126). He also adds that “a well-functioning public sphere with open communication structures that permit and promote discussions oriented to self-understanding” can eventually “extend to guaranteeing different ethnic
groups and their cultural form of life (“Struggles” 128). When someone enters into intercultural discourse, the person is encouraged to give due weight to what he observes and hears because in the process of conversation, one realizes the abundance of meaning he can draw from and how that can significantly affect one’s life. The more the participants give themselves wholly to the process of discourse, the greater they become receptive to the feelings, aspirations, and insights of others. It is indeed being-one-with-the-other. As Martine Abdallah-Pretceille comments:

To learn to see, to hear, to be mindful of other people, to learn to be alert and open in a perspective of diversity and not of differences, calls for the recognition and experience of otherness, experience that is acquired and that is practised. (478)

Realizing all this, the participants may be able to recognize that what is arrived at in the intercultural discourse can be shared by all of them. Whatever they have come to agree upon is expressive of their desire and collaboration to unite their perspectives: their openness in welcoming thoughts, views, suggestions, comments, feelings, and insights other than their own. Since it is not only a work of one, but a fruit of the efforts of all the free and willing participants, it is rationally justified and objective. In this regard, I find Mitias and Al-Jasmi’s comment resonates with what Habermas has to say, to wit:

truth revealed in the dialogue is objective, and it is objective because it is determined by reason. Truth is not the possession of any one mind; consequently, no one can have any special claim to it! We should not forget that the truth reached in a dialogue is the result of a cooperative endeavor. (150)

Indeed, the postmodern period has made us aware of the plurality of cultures and of the right of any culture to exist. The promotion of the plurality of cultures has become a vehicle for the emancipation from oppression, especially with regard to race, gender, religious beliefs, language, and ethnicity. The universe of cultures is where diverse cultures can work together to arrive at a mutual understanding on issues which have universal import, such as peace, harmony, and respect. Recognizing this universe demands that men and women of diverse cultures look into concerns they could agree upon and objectively respond to without necessarily assuming one’s superiority. In fact, the very notion of the universe
of cultures should make people aware of their capacity to think, reason, perceive, plan, and work together on equal footing.

All of this is about synergy, about sharing and expressing points of view in a rational discourse. It is not merely, as Edgar Javier expresses, “a matter of talking” or of uttering words, or “a tool to understand the other” (*Dialogue* 158). Intercultural discourse in the universe of cultures is thus essential since it allows everyone “a wider array of views in confronting and explaining all phenomena rather than striking into only one approach to respond to a given situation” (Markman 247). It involves trust and openness to the perspectives of others and the ability to journey together in humility to discern and understand the challenges of human existence in the hope that such can bring about a common ideal that truly benefits all life. In this sense, the approach of intercultural discourse is all-inclusive, weighs all possibilities, and leads to a decision on which option is best for all concerned. It also implies that social participants are encouraged to express their claim in a rational manner without fear of harm. Intercultural discourse is grounded on the universal human values of respect, trust, openness, and commitment to truth; these values aim at a horizon where diverse cultures can meet each other on the same level.

**COMMUNICATIVE RELATIONS IN THE UNIVERSE OF CULTURES**

In the preceding sections we tried to establish the aspects and goals of communicative relations and point out the elements of the universe of cultures that enable intercultural discourse. We now come to the challenges of communicative relations to the universe of cultures and how they can help people become more open to a culture of inclusion.

First, communicative relation is interactive and reflective, critical and discursive. In the universe of cultures, communicative relation challenges fundamentalism, ethnocentricism, racism, intolerance, suspicion, exclusivism, and isolationism. For the universe of cultures to thrive, a critique of culture is necessary because such opens the possibility for a culture to transform those elements that are divisive and heighten those that promote respect and unity among different peoples. As Ranhilio Aquino points out, a critique of culture opens the possibility for “de-legitimization” which in itself is a redemptive moment or “re-legitimization” of culture. When a culture is subjected to rational scrutiny and justification, it undergoes “de-legitimization” in the sense that it has to clarify and vindicate itself. At the same time, it experiences “re-legitimization”
for the critique brings this culture into the sphere of discourse (Aquino 303). Unless cultures engage in a communicative discourse, what tends to happen is exclusivism, or a privatization of culture, and as such, there can be no universe of cultures. Everyone will just become disinterested and suspicious of other cultures.

Secondly, communicative relation is an essential paradigm for intercultural discourse if the goal is “participation in a just and morally decent world” (Nussbaum 324). In this regard, the universe of cultures must indeed be socio-culturally transformative and secure equal regard for different cultures. It should aim at “the mutual recognition of the equal status of all members” and further the “transformation of interpersonal relations” (Habermas, “Equal Treatment” 16). It should break open the compartmentalization of cultures, that is, the thinking that one possesses the “superior culture” or the “perfect culture” (some examples are Eurocentrism, the hegemony of Western culture, and the privileging of what is from “State-side”) while others have an “inferior culture” (Habermas, “Struggles” 119; Pacelli 167). The universe of cultures flourishes when everybody learns from each other. Habermas asserts, “a dogmatically protected culture will not be able to reproduce itself, particularly in a social environment rich with alternatives” (“Equal Treatment” 23). As “it is important for each one to keep his own cultural identity clearly in mind,” there is a need to understand, respect and critically accept ways of being or perceiving coming from other cultures (Pacelli 254).

Thirdly, communicative relations further inclusivity. Interactive learning continues to flow where there is mutual recognition. In a like manner, the universe of cultures should be a space where this value is most alive. Habermas notes that:

coexistence of forms of life ... means ensuring every citizen the opportunity to grow up within the world of cultural heritage and to have his or her children grow up in it without suffering discrimination because of it. (“Struggles” 131)

The universe of cultures subjects culture to discourse and transformation. It promotes sensitivity to the demands for equal respect. It attempts to achieve rational consensus where communicative participants can commit themselves to help each other nurture their cultural heritage, views, beliefs, and perspectives. Democratic discourses (that is, neither strategic nor instrumental) on culture help everyone clarify and strengthen what they value. Through discourse one enriches his understanding of his own culture and achieves a greater appreciation for and develops a more
courteous approach to other people's culture. The universe of cultures is not about constructing a single culture for everybody, but is about cultivating an inclusive culture where everyone respects and learns from each other. It establishes a culture of heteronomy against hegemony, a culture of plurality against uniformity.

Fourthly, everyone is challenged to promote communion through "mutual understanding" and not through an instrumental and success-driven mode of communication. To enter into intercultural discourse is to learn from others about their experiences and the reasons they value in their culture. It is to bring about a thorough transformation of the cultural systems if they do not respond in an authentic way to the invitation for inclusivity. Intercultural discourse respects human dignity and human freedom, which are grounded on rationality. The main point of reference is nothing but the human values of solidarity, mutual advantage and fellowship, social and self-transformation, and self-creation (Centeno 19–25).

Finally, in the universe of cultures, one has to be faithful to one's cultural traditions but nonetheless still be open to culture-introspection; this is to be done by "granting the insight and truth in other" cultures to speak to one's own (Aquino 298). One needs to seriously recognize, with utmost respect, other cultural perspectives as cognitively grounded, and approach these other cultural allegiances and practices as "genuine truth-claims" (Aquino 299). As Centeno points out:

While it is the case that individuals are defined by their own cultures, this cannot however be the justification for attempts to commit cultural isolation. Being multicultural individuals, we are inspired to look for and find, in every creative way possible, areas whereby we can encourage mutual understanding with other cultures. (20)

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Jürgen Habermas is an example of a person who calls to mind the significance of culture to one's existence and to society in general. His theory of communicative action allows for an emergence of a renewed self-understanding when applied to the understanding of cultures. Communicative theory in Habermas is what promotes intercultural understanding and a better appreciation of other cultures without disowning one's own.

Culture is the totality of one's being, it is what we say about ourselves, about others, and about our world, and brings into attention who we are. In this sense, culture is linguistic and communicative. To say that culture
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is characteristically linguistic is to realize that culture is one’s abode, is where one dwells. The Filipino word *tahanan* (home) significantly captures what this means. *Tahanan* from the root word *tahan* is where one finds peace and serenity because it is where a person could be him/herself, and at the same time, it is where s/he becomes sensitive to those who live nearby (other cultures).

By acknowledging culture as *tahanan* or dwelling, we realize a universe of cultures (that is, the connectivity of diverse cultures) whose normative content is mutual understanding. We arrive at this normative content when we transform cultures which are initially passive or have become so into active ones. Cultures are inherently communicative: as conditions of individual and social growth they represent shared mutual openness. Hence a deeper understanding of culture is a source of renewed self-understanding and social transformation. We must know our culture to know ourselves.

A deep understanding of culture makes us realize that culture is what Being is. This means that culture is an affirmation of social ontology, it is what orients us to sociality. Hence the ethical thing to do in the universe of cultures is for one to cultivate one’s culture by making it open to others, to have it relate to and not isolate itself from others. As a result of this willingness to embrace intercultural discourse, peace in the world can happen. The universe of cultures shows us both the vast possibilities of intercultural relationships, as well as how arrogant we can become at times. The immensity of the universe of cultures brings to mind that we are just a speck, and that we have nothing to brag about but our capacity to dialogue with other cultures. The universe of cultures constantly invites us to learn from other cultures and be open to changing ourselves, however painful that may be.

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