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### **Polylogues on Conflicting Values - the Role of Cultural Centrisms**

The project of philosophy, I understand to be fundamentally a trial to ascertain insights concerning basic ontological, epistemological and normative questions, and to express such insights adequately, thereby making them approachable and arguable in an inter-subjective way.

With respect to its content, philosophy can be characterized in a traditional (Western) way as dealing with either ontological, or epistemological, or else ethical questions, in order to clarify concepts and propositions connected with such fields. Philosophy, we may say, basically tries to solve questions of ontology or epistemology, or ethics. It does so by way of argumentation, which means that reason and logic in some way or other are to be expected as being universally used. With respect to its form, philosophy is developing definitions as well as some sort of meta-language, which allows making explicit general statements.

Philosophy in this technical sense of the word can be found in the heritages of different ancient societies. So, there are different origins of later philosophies, originating in societies that were different linguistically, socially, and with respect to their religious orientations. Some of those traditions still are influential in today's societies in such a way that different orientations are provided which may be incompatible sometimes. However, the process of modernization and globalization has made it necessary to promote or, at least, develop a set of common ideas.

The fundamental question for philosophy, in such a situation, consists in the need to question about the conditions of the possibility of systematic philosophy. It presupposes that there are different cultural coinages in every philosophical thinking which can be influential on every level of reflection and argumentation. We can call that

#### *1. The Dilemma of Culturality of Philosophy*

The "dilemma of culturality" for philosophy stems from the fact that more is at stake than just a completion of Eurocentric historiography of philosophy by descriptions of non-Occidental traditions and by comparisons with them, if we are to be entitled to talk about interculturally oriented philosophy at all.<sup>1</sup> The Latin prefix "inter-" is denoting a mutual relationship, and it may suffice hinting to the fact that we are using the adjective "intercultural" with respect to the noun "philosophy". It is indicated that what is under consideration is not some sort of "philosophical" or "historiographical" interculturality, not just mutual understanding, but is merely philosophy. However, philosophy as a discipline has to reflect constantly its own concepts, questions, and methods with respect to the fact, irritating for every argumentation,

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<sup>1</sup> For comparative philosophy cf. Bahm, Archie J.: *Comparative Philosophy. Western, Indian and Chinese Philosophies Compared*. Albuquerque: World Books 1995. He writes, p. 7: "It (viz. comparative philosophy, FW) is not preoccupied directly with the solution of particular problems, such as the nature of truth or self or causality." Several contributions to Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (eds.): "Interpreting Across Boundaries" (Princeton: UP 1988) critically discuss purely comparative approaches. Cf. Daya Krishna: "The interesting approach in comparative philosophy would ... be to search not for similarities but for differences. But even the differences are philosophically interesting only when they are articulated not in terms of the doctrines held, but in terms of the problems perceived and the solutions attempted. Ultimately, it is the arguments given for a certain position that are of interest to a philosophical mind..." (Krishna, Daya: *Comparative Philosophy: What It Is and What It Ought to Be*. In: *l.c.*, pp. 71-83, quote: p. 82)

that there is not one and the definitely adequate language or tradition of philosophizing. There are many, each of them being cultural, not natural.<sup>2</sup>

One of the consequences from such a situation is, that one inevitably has to interpret the thoughts of others by one's own concepts and categories. Given this fact, the question arises, whether such a "centrism", inevitable as it may be, always works along identical lines. The following paragraphs explain that there are different types of centrism, whose differences are relevant to philosophy and forms of intercultural encounters.

## *2. Four Types of Cultural Centrism*

### **2.1. Expansive centrism**

By "expansive centrism" we can understand the idea that "the truth" about something, or "the optimum" of a certain way of life be already reached definitely, and therefore has to be disseminated everywhere. Such an idea can be read – as a religious idea - from the Christian gospel as well as from the theories about the necessity of modernizing and civilizing non-European humankind in a secular understanding.

The idea assumes that there is a centre, where reigns true faith, definite knowledge, objective progress. And there is a periphery, ruled by paganism and superstition, backwardness and underdevelopment.

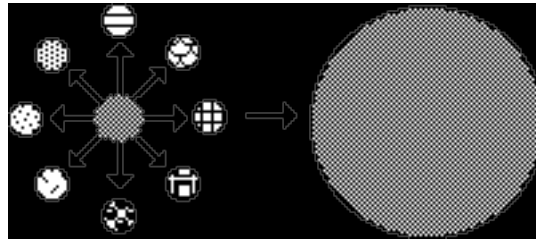
It is the task of the centre, from this perspective, to expand and supersede, ultimately, to eliminate everything else. This leads to the imagination of a monologic process, a proclamation of salvation in religious, of prosperity and happiness in secular sense.

Implied essentially in such an idea is the absence of serious alternatives to the "truth" or the "optimum". The imagined monologue has to go to all directions, but no response from elsewhere ought to touch the centre.

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<sup>2</sup> For some of the different approaches of intercultural philosophy confer the papers by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Ram Adhar Mall, Raimondo Panikkar and Franz M. Wimmer in: polylog. Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren, Wien, vol.1, no.1 1998. These articles are also available from the Internet: <http://www.polylog.org>

The following diagram elucidates this type of expansive centrisms:



## 2.2. Integrative centrisms

A second type, which can be coined "integrative centrisms" may start from the same conviction about the objective superiority of one's own ways of thinking and living, but may at the same time not try actively to overcome rivals. One's own way could be thought to be attractive to such a degree that it would be self sufficient to attract and integrate others.

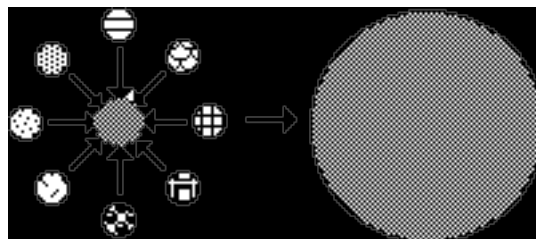
Such an idea can be encountered in classical Confucianism, when Mencius discusses the question as to how to gain power.

The task of the centre according to this view consists in the permanent maintenance or restoration of what is known to be the right order. No further activity of the centre is thought to be necessary, since the attraction of the centre is so strong that every activity that comes from the periphery aims at adapting itself to the way of the centre.

The outcome of such an idea, again, is a monologic process in the sense of offering the good way of life. As in the first case, here also can be no more alternatives. Both these cases are arrogant about the superiority of one's own way. They presuppose a complete antithesis between one's own way of thinking and living and that of all the others.

Both types share the bias that there is nothing valuable to be expected from the outside and that therefore the differing ways of thinking and living ultimately will vanish.

The idea of an "integrative centrisms" can be speculated in the following way:



Both types of centrisms do not allow space for ways of thinking and acting other than their own. They presuppose superiority and exclusivity of their own respective perspectives.

True dialogues - and polylogues as well - in philosophy not only require that the participants are open to each other's arguments, but also that they are convinced of their own ways of thinking, not giving them up without sufficient reasons. This leads to a decisive question: Are

these orientations, which are compatible with the conviction of the optimality of one's own way of thinking, and do not imply the assertion of its exclusive validity or truth?

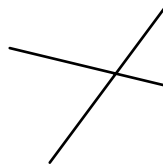
The question will be decisive in the context of the situation of philosophy in the process of globalization. It implies coexistence of orientations, not necessarily congruent, even incompatible, which are rooted in well-developed and differentiated discourses. If, under such conditions, something valuable is expected to result from encounters, we will have to look for types of "centrism", which are not exclusive.

### 2.3. Separative or multiple centrism

This type of centrism is distinguished by an attitude which accepts the coexistence of several or many convictions side by side. They may tolerate each other, there may even be mutual esteem, resulting in a multitude of separate "centres".

From this perspective, diversity and multiplicity, not homogeneity is basically accepted in a "multicultural" understanding. The danger of such a view - probably fatal for philosophy - can be that differences are seen to be insurmountable, as if they were naturally, not culturally conditioned.

The main task of the various centres as per this view will consist in the conservation of their respective identity and heritage, and in the differentiation from other traditions. These traditions will persist in neat segregation from each other. Under certain conditions, they will tolerate each other, but they will not allow influences in questions of "truth" and "values"; there will be no discourse between them. The situation can be illustrated as follows:



### 2.4. Tentative or transitory centrism

Another type of centrism can be seen as transitory or tentative, allowing both the conviction of being right and openness to basically different views of others, who are equally convinced of being right. It may even be a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the other's conviction that I am "absolutely" sure about mine. Here too, plurality and not uniformity is thought to be fundamental, though in such a way that every concrete instance of thinking is not held to be final, but provisional.

Let us assume that there are four possible participants in a dialogue or polylogue on some issue; any one can be interested in the others, and open to them in a varying degree. Any of them may act and think from their respective field of evidence since all of them have "cultural coinages". Still, these conditions may lead to processes of mutual influencing - of manipulating, persuading, and convincing each other - which may be intended to develop mutual argumentation.

Every participant in such a situation remains a "centre", but none of these "centres" is held to be the definite stand. Everyone fundamentally agrees that there may be views and insights, different and even contrary to his or her own. When there are sufficient motives to dialogues, each "centre" will try to convince the others or some of them, if they are philosophising at all.

A process of convincing would be a qualified form of influencing somebody else, which ought to be distinguished from manipulating as well as from persuading. What all of these expressions and respective argumentative actions have in common is that they aim to change somebody's opinions or the way he/she behaves or acts. However, only processes of convincing ought to be considered being decisive, even if persuading as well as manipulating practically may lead to the same effects.<sup>3</sup>

In a tentative understanding of being "centres", there will be persistence yet openness, criticism yet acceptance of the arguments of others. A tentative understanding of "centres" may be seen as follows:

Finally, we have to inquire to what degree the respective type of centrism is understood as holistic or partial. It may be very rare, but is not to be excluded logically, that alternative ways of thinking and living are refused *in toto*. Usually refusal is limited to certain fields, while tolerance as well as receptivity prevail in other fields.

### *3. Exclusive Centrisms in Action*

Each one of the four types of apprehending and criticizing of thinking different from one's own, develops certain strategies to demonstrate its own superiority. In this sense, each type is centrist. They differ according to the different hierarchies of knowledge and abilities they imply, and consequently in the difference of expectations and valuations of the other.

What the first three types have in common is that everything, which is thought to be of real interest and reliability, is supposed to be found within one's own tradition. Expansive, as well as integrative and separative centrism do not seriously expect that there is something to learn from other cultural traditions.

Exclusivistic forms of centrism have to be expected to rise from different conditions, cultural traditions, and convictions. Sino-centrism can be met with, but also Afro- and Islamo-centrism and others. In any case, as it is with Euro-centrism, different extra-philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> It is the common goal of any of these procedures to change the standards of judging and/or of behaviour of at least one addressed person. Let us exclude the case that such a change takes place by means of physical or psychical force. Then we will have to consider three modes of influencing by argumentation. Any of the procedures will be successful if and only if the person to be manipulated, persuaded, or convinced consents to the contents of the act of manipulation, of persuading, or of convincing. It must not be the case that the author of such an act also has to consent to these contents - at least not in the case of manipulation. For the content of a convincing argumentation it is a necessary condition that this content is consented upon by the author of such an argument. And more: the author as well as the addressed person(s) of such a process hold this content to be true or valid out of good (cognitive) reasons. For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between "convincing", "persuading", and "manipulating" see my paper "Du sollst argumentieren! Zur Logik juristischer Argumentation" in: Helmuth Vetter and Michael Potacs (eds.): Beiträge zur juristischen Hermeneutik. Wien: Literas 1990, pp. 106-114.

motives will have to be taken into account: religious as well as nationalistic and chauvinistic, racist as well as ideological persuasions may be decisive.

#### 4. *Tolerance and Beyond – the Polylogical Alternative*

Let us consider now some of the differences and consequences of the types of centrism distinguished.

From Occidental tradition the typos of "expansive centrism" might be most familiar. It is characteristic for this type that the overcoming of alternatives is thought to be possible by no other means than active influencing. From the beginnings of Christianity, it was imperative to "go out and teach all nations"<sup>4</sup>, and it was not explicitly implied in that imperative that those nations ("pánta tà éthne", the Greek version has it) would contribute their own understandings in a dialogical process. On the contrary - these "ethnic" worldviews ought not to change the original doctrine. Which nevertheless happened all the time in the course of Christian expansion.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to such missionary understanding, modern science and enlightenment nourished the very same idea. "Progress", "civilization", even "culture" were taken to be terms in the singular, and such preconceptions hold with some terms up to this day. "Democracy", "modernity" and "freedom" in popular political speech are supposed to denote ideas in a univocal way, which have developed in rational processes within the Western world, and now have to be installed unaltered everywhere else. The "others" would not interfere, if only they knew about their own needs and interests. Rudyard Kipling in 1899 wrote the famous lines expressing the idea most clearly:

Take up the White Man's burden,  
Send forth the best ye breed -  
Go, bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives need.

On the other hand, the idea of an "integrative centrism" can be identified in classical texts from Chinese philosophy. Well known in Taoist tradition is the principle of "wu wei", of non-interference or "taking no action", but the term is common in Confucianism<sup>6</sup> and Legalism<sup>7</sup> as well. When Mencius was asked by a king about the way to gain the empire, his answer has been in the same direction. The ruler does not have to activate troops and to organise tax paying, but only to look that justice is done to everyone:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Matth., 28, 19-20

<sup>5</sup> "Hellenisation" and "Germanisation" are not the only cases in that respect. It should be useful for intercultural philosophy, to study closely the conditions and outcomes in inter-cultural processes like the catholic and protestant missions in India, China, Japan, Mexico, Africa etc., to learn about the ways of mutual influences.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Confucius, Analects 15,4: Confucius said, "To have taken no [unnatural] action and yet have the empire well governed, Shun was the man! What did he do? All he did was to make himself reverent and correctly face south [in his royal seat as the ruler]." Quotation from: Wing-tsit Chan: A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy. Princeton: Princeton UP 1969, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Chan's commentary on Han Feizi: "The Taoist ideal of taking no action (*wu wei*) had a strong appeal to the Legalists because if laws worked effectively at all times, there would be no need for any actual government. The various Taoist tactics, such as withdrawing before advancing, must have impressed the Legalists as clever techniques." Chan, op.cit., p. 255

„...among the shepherds of men throughout the empire, there is not one who does not find pleasure in killing men. If there were one who did not find pleasure in killing men, all the people in the empire would look towards him with outstretched necks. Such being indeed the case, the people would flock to him, as water flows downwards with a rush, which no one can repress.“<sup>8</sup>

The non-interference principle of Daoism mostly is read to have metaphysical significance, i.e. to accord oneself to the "way" of Dao. Still, there are implications concerning the "naturalness" of certain techniques<sup>9</sup> as of political measures. In a generalized way, we may understand it to be a concept concerning the relationship to the world-views of others, too. There are not only recent texts from China, which are expressing the same idea about the unchallenged attractivity of one's own heritage<sup>10</sup>, one may also find traces of it in the history of science in China.<sup>11</sup>

In formal sense both these types of expansive and of integrative centrism are presupposing that truth in theoretical matters, and validity in practical norms has definitely been established. With respect to "alien" ways of thinking, a typical hypothesis of such types may be that those others can be seen as preliminary stages of one's own. Therefore, they will be tolerable insofar, as they do not hinder general development and do not resist to reasonable acculturation. Certainly the criteria for reasonableness and generality will be defined without the participation of those not belonging to the centre.

There may be practical reasons for tolerance under such premises, but such reasons will only hold under conditions, and in a limited area. The limits will be decided upon by those who tolerate, and not by the tolerated. The most important reasons for tolerance under similar premises are: *interest* of some kind in the other; *lack of real danger* from the side of the other; *lack of real power* to eliminate the other and lastly, *hope for profit* out of the other. If one of

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<sup>8</sup> Mencius I, 6, transl. J. Legge: The Four Books. Hong Kong: Culture Book 1980, p. 447s.

<sup>9</sup> See the story in Zhuangzi XII, 11, where the daoist gardener rejects to use mechanical means to provide watering, proposed by a Confucian. "I have heard from my teacher that, where there are ingenious contrivances, there are sure to be subtle doings; and that, where there are subtle doings, there is sure to be a scheming mind. But, when there is a scheming mind in the breast, its pure simplicity is impaired. When this pure simplicity is impaired, the spirit becomes unsettled, and the unsettled spirit is not the proper residence of the Tao." (quot. from J. Legge's Translation in: The Sacred Books of China. The Texts of Taoism, Vol. I, Delhi: Banarsidass 1977, p. 320)

<sup>10</sup> When dealing with global aspects of the development of humankind, Li Shenzi emphasises the reliability of the experiences from China's history and their applicability with respect to crises of modern societies in the West and elsewhere. For such a task " ... besitzt China relativ gute Ausgangsbedingungen. Den Kern der etwa fünftausend Jahre alten Kulturgeschichte Chinas bildet zwar die Kultur des Gelben Flusses in Zentralchina, doch führten Konflikte und Kollisionen der verschiedensten Kulturen auf ihrem Territorium zu Kooperation und Anpassung, was letztendlich die heutige chinesische Nation hervorgebracht hat. ... Als Chinese bin ich prinzipiell davon überzeugt, daß von der chinesischen Philosophie als Kern unserer Kultur ein Ausweg nicht nur aus der kulturellen Krise des gegenwärtigen China, sondern auch aus der globalen kulturellen Krise führt." (Li Shenzi: Globalisierung und chinesische Kultur. Trier: Zentrum für Ostasien-Pazifik-Studien 1997, p. 14-15)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Shigeru Nakayama: Academic and Scientific Traditions in China, Japan, and the West. Tokyo: Univ. of Tokyo Press 1984, p. 58: "For the Chinese, to engage in scholarship meant to record and classify. Whatever the phenomenon, it was duly noted and put in one of the several compartments set up for classification purposes. Once this had been done, however, the scholar's job was finished. ... Little was challenged, confuted, rejected, or debated ..." This is said with respect to natural science and cosmology, but Nakayama generally sees "a preference for arguing in terms of precedent and previous example that contrasts with the Greek style of logical persuasion." (ibid., p. 12)

these conditions fail, tolerance is not to be expected under the premises of exclusive types of centrism.

The case seems to be different with "multiple" or "separative centrism", and it certainly is different with respect to mere tolerance. There, most different ways of thinking and acting can be seen as being cultural universes, coexisting without any pretension to absolute truth or validity in any field. Rarely, the idea has been expressed in such crude terms as did the German Oswald Spengler around World War I. "For other men", he said, "there are other truths. To the thinker all of them are valid, or no one."<sup>12</sup>

In philosophy, some approximation to such a position can be found, when it is held that there are fundamental differences between "East" and "West" and that "never the twain shall meet". If we are concerned with more than these two, the maxim might be to let a hundred "ethnophilosophies" be flowering. All of them might argue by different standards of logic, they might conceptualize their world by concepts so different from others that they could not be translated in somebody else's concepts. Even if they may have not in common any aesthetic or moral values, they will not try to persuade others, out of the consciousness that there is nothing arguable. In such a world people certainly will tolerate each other, there would be no argument whatsoever for intolerance. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine reasons why people in such a world should seriously discuss with each other. With other words, philosophy in traditional understanding, as it has been practiced in Greece and the Occident as well as in India, China, Korea, and Japan, in the Arab world since Kalam and the Mutazilites, in African societies and maybe in Aztec Mexico - philosophy in this understanding will not continue under such sceptical premises.

However, there is no risk that such cultural scepticism<sup>13</sup> ever gains serious acceptance outside academic circles and trendy books. In fact, human beings will continue to reason for their convictions, and will try to convince each other. Therefore, cultivation of something like the "tentative" types of centrism, as it is intended in the model of polylogues, is a primary task in philosophy. The capacity of human beings "to change perspectives"<sup>14</sup> is the fundament for it, which has to be cultivated not only inter-culturally, but also intra-culturally.

Tolerance will mean in such a view no mere letting-be, be it sceptic or dogmatic, but mutual interest and the permanent endeavour to activate reason, wherever is the need to that. I do not see how philosophy could proceed otherwise.

### **Consequences: The Need for Polylogues**

a) The first consequence considering the situation of globalized humankind with basically different regional ways of thinking consists in a (self-) critical evaluation of philosophy as a profession. We have to acknowledge that any professional training of philosophers, that equates the general term "philosophy" with the culturally bound term "occidental philosophy"

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<sup>12</sup> Spengler, Oswald: Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte. München: dtv 1975, Vol.I, p. 34: „Für andere Menschen gibt es andere Wahrheiten. Für den Denker sind sie alle gültig oder keine.“

<sup>13</sup> I do not use the term "relativism" here, because it is hard to see to what object or matter of fact such a position could possibly be related.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Holenstein, Elmar: Intra- und interkulturelle Hermeneutik. In: Kulturphilosophische Perspektiven. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1988, p. 257: "Die Verständigung zwischen den Kulturen wird durch die menschliche Fähigkeit zum Perspektivenwechsel ermöglicht, die für die Verständigung innerhalb ein und derselben Kultur (zwischen ihren diversen Regionen und desgleichen zwischen ihren verschiedene Standpunkte vertretenden Individuen) um nichts weniger erforderlich ist."

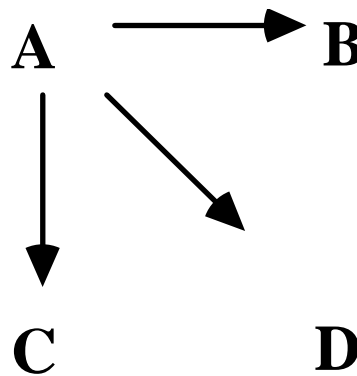
is misleading. This equation has been the normal case with almost all professional philosophers, at least in the West, for a long period. This will be no easy task, since a necessary precondition for it - by far not a sufficient one - Euro-centrism has to be criticized and developed into a general criticism of centristic ways of thinking, and molded into a theory of non-centristic philosophy.

b) The relevance of cultural traditions for the present and the future has to be analyzed. The first step again will be to reconstruct different traditions of thought in a comprehensive and differentiated way. In that field, contemporary African philosophers did pioneering work. However, if their work is not limited to provide better self-understanding, but to lead to better understanding between persons of different cultural coinage, new categories and concepts must be elaborated. This will be a continuation of the project of European enlightenment with different means: not by relying on a unique method of science, but by creating a polylogue<sup>15</sup> of traditions.

We have to consider the preconditions and the limitations, as well as expectable results of such a polylogue. Different grades and forms of the influence of one or more traditions upon other traditions have to be distinguished. For the purpose of an illustration, let us take the case of, say, four relevant traditions: A, B, C, D.<sup>16</sup>

If we imagine different models, especially the cases of strict monologues and polylogues, it has to be emphasized that both are not to be expected in real world. Neither will there ever be processes of influencing, which remain completely one-sided, without any influence from the other side. Nor will mutual dialogues from many sides ever be done in complete equality. There always will be more interest in one "otherness" than in others, to say the least. Let us illustrate the models to see that.

An "ideal" monologue of "A" towards "B", "C" and "D" would look like that:




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<sup>15</sup> I am talking about "polylogues" rather than "dialogues" to indicate that many sides, not just two can be involved. Though the "dia-" in "dialogue" means "in between", and does not linguistically imply "two", association is common that a dialogue is between two persons or positions. Even comparative philosophy often tends to twofold, not manifold comparisons and dialogues. The "poly-", meaning "many" may indicate the need to have in mind that there possibly are several traditions and positions. term "polylogue" itself is no neo-logism in an absolute sense. The ancient Greek used the term "polylogía" to denote talking about many contents at the same time, sort of chatter, which of course can be practised by a single person. Here, it is used in the sense that many persons, representing many philosophical traditions, go into discourse with each other on one topic or problem.

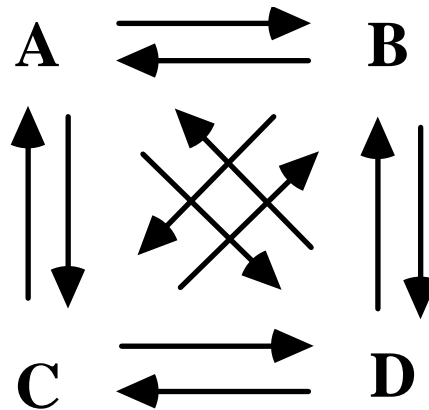
<sup>16</sup> It is not at all evident in a given discussion that there will be unanimous agreement about what "A,B,C,D" means, nor about what traditions are relevant. If, e.g., in a quarrel about human rights Confucianist as well as Occidental and Islamic conceptions of man are confronted to each other, there might be claimed that the "muntu"-concept from African traditions also has to be reflected upon - and such a list of candidates may get long. However, here I only want to consider the formal side of the question.

There are no influences whatsoever, coming from others in the direction to "A". Second, there is indifference and ignoring between all others. Third, the influence of "A" equally works in any direction.

It is to be doubted that any of these items ever occurs in real discourse. However, real processes can tend to come close to such a model. There are unilateral conceptions of absolute superiority, as we have seen with respect to "centrisms", there is lack of "South-South" dialogues in philosophy. And there was, and maybe is, the concept of "the white man's burden" to act into all regions and directions in order to baptize or to develop the rest of the world.

Still, the idea itself is not realistic. Can it be something like a regulative ideal? One has to hold a very strong presupposition to believe that. One has to be sure that "A" is right in every respect where there are differences with others. I doubt that this could be shown by culturally independent means.

Let us now imagine an "ideal" polylogue between "A", "B", "C", and "D":



There are influences from all sides to every tradition; everyone is interested in every other; all of the influences are working with equal intensity.

This again is not depicting reality. But it is again important to ask, whether such an ideal can serve as a regulative idea for practicing philosophy on a global scale. It seems preferable from logical reasons, since there will be no presupposition of absolute rightness, as long as there are different views. The presupposition here merely is that activating human reason in as many directions as possible will be effective.