

Book Review Response 【書評回應】

Response to Stephan Schmidt[§]

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As an answer to urgent questions of cultural orientation in the globalizing process the project of developing a "new humanism" was been started in 2006. As one result of the ongoing international research and cooperation meanwhile 10 volumes in a special book-series and about 100 articles have been published. Stephan Schmidt's review of the first volume (*Humanism in Intercultural Perspective—Experiences and Expectations*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009) in this journal (Vol. 7, No. 2, Issue 14, Dec. 2010, pp. 361-372) indicates some problems of this approach. Schmidt understands the intention of this humanism as caught in a clear pre-given dichotomy between universalism and relativism. For him any universalistic approach to norms and values of human life is seen as an attack against the difference and variety in which human life is manifest and pursued. Indeed, universalism may bring along the danger of forcing the richness of human culture into a uniform scheme of a global life form, whereas relativism is supposed to appreciate this rich variety and to endow human life with an unlimited chance for uniqueness. But can this juxtaposition be the only way of looking at the project's quest for a cultural answer to the growing global world?

§ This article is a response to the review commentary of the book *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations* written by Dr. Stephan Schmidt on vol. 7 no. 2 of *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*.

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With his clear juxtaposition Stephan Schmidt fundamentally denies any possibility for a humanism which may cover the whole field of humanity as it has been and is being shaped into the one single humankind by the forces of globalization. For him the only answer to these forces is to defend the relativity of cultural orientations according to the historically pregiven, enormously varying conditions of human life. At first glance this relativism has an important advantage we can easily sympathize with: it avoids any suppressive universalistic ideology, which tries to press the creativity of human culture into uniforming patterns. The inhumanity of many universalistic worldviews and ideologies is evident. Of course, one can even go so far as to hint at an inbuilt tendency of domination in any conceptual act of universalization when following the corresponding argumentation of Theodor W. Adorno and others.

So why not be content with the post-modern attitudes of relativism and its respect for difference? There are three arguments which can disturb any relativistic satisfaction when dealing with human culture.

Let me first mention a very simple epistemological argument. Relativism as a concept or idea of human culture in its historical manifestation is universalistic itself and therefore logically contradictory. The juxtaposition of particularism and universalism overlooks the rich philosophical tradition of dialectics although the performative contradiction between relativism and universalism can easily be solved by a dialectical argumentation.

The second argument refers to a very problematic tradition of theory of civilization and culture.¹ In this tradition cultures differ essentially; they are characterized as semantic totalities, which follow a unique cultural code of

1 See Jörn Rüsen, "Intercultural Humanism: How to Do the Humanities in the Age of Globalization," in *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, issue 12 (Dec., 2009), pp. 1-24, especially pp. 10-14; id.: "Culture: Universalism, Relativism or What Else?" in *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April, 2004), pp. 1-8, also in Wälde, Martin (ed.), *Does Culture Make a Difference? Progress and Development in India and its Implications for International Cooperation. Conference Papers* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008), pp. 12-19.

understanding the world. Their interrelationship therefore can only be an external one, which only touches the surface; and there is no possibility of leaving the boundaries or constraints of such a code in favour of a trans-cultural one. The most remarkable and influential case for this basically 'relativistic' idea of culture is set by Oswald Spengler. This theory of culture ignores the historicity and interrelationship of all cultural life forms; it shares the performative self-contradiction of each relativism and refutes itself by its typological characterization of the variety of cultures (as it comes along with this kind of idea of culture or civilization, e.g. as we see in the work of Johann Galtung).²

Concerning the idea of humanism, my third argument is the most important one: Intercultural humanism is based on some transculturally valid principles of sense generation.³ All of them can be condensed into one single principle: that of human dignity. (Here I follow Kant's basic and universal attribute every human being is endowed with; namely that he or she is always more than only a means to the purposes of others, but a purpose within him- or herself.)⁴ By the way: is it not this dignity, which supports the emphasis on cultural difference? Is it not this human dignity which gives post-modern relativism its intellectual persuasiveness? *Humanism understands the universality of this dignity not across, against or beyond the variety of human lifeforms and their historicity and individuality, but on the contrary: it is manifest in and realized by this variety.* This dialectics has completely been overlooked and not at all been addressed in

2 Johann Galtung, "Six Cosmologies: an Impressionistic Presentation," in: id: *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 221-222.

3 See the anthropological evidence given by Christoph Antweiler, *Mensch und Weltkultur. Für einen realistischen Kosmopolitismus im Zeitalter Globalisierung.* (Der Mensch in Netz der Kulturen—Humanismus in der Epoche der Globalisierung, vol. 10) (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011).

4 Now I say: man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end. (Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* [Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1785, 1st edition], p. 65.)

Stephan Schmidt's criticism. (But I have to admit that this dialectics has not been sufficiently explicated in my introducing remarks: though, on the other hand, the whole book could not be understood without referring to it, as it is powerfully working in the idea of mediating between universalism and particularity leading to the idea of individualism. It was this idea which was developed and presented by modern humanism as it can be perceived in the works of Herder and Humboldt.)

Even if one does not refer to the elaborated concept of dialectics, the simple fact that humans are able to understand each other out of their difference could be a promising starting point for this approach. Every act of understanding realizes difference and common ground at the same time. What is more humane? And it is this dialectics at the basis of all hermeneutics which furnishes the intended idea of humanism with a fundamental plausibility.

Schmidt wonders what is new in the proposed 'new humanism'. In order to give an answer to this question one would have had to ask what the 'old' humanism was about, and what the change or turn from the old into a new one means and what it has achieved. My article and the whole book gives the following answer: the old one is the modern Western humanism as it was historically present in different discourses of the late 18th and early 19th century: it was an intellectual humanism emphasizing the historicity and individuality of human lifeforms in the encompassing dimension of humankind, it was also a political humanism claiming for basic human and civil rights, as well as an educational humanism centered around the idea of self-cultivation aiming at a full and autonomous personality in human ontogeny. This concept of "Bildung" was directed against the leading principle of profitability, and related attempts so that humans should be enabled to live humane lives.

The proposed and attempted new humanism should pick up these elaborated elements, amalgamate them and as a result prove as an up-to-date translation of the

old one into the conditions of the 21st century. My introduction emphasized the following evolving elements as new ones: a non-ethnocentric idea of humankind and its historicity and individuality, a new awareness of human vulnerability and inhumanity and of the basic concept of suffering in understanding the human world, and a new idea of reasoning as effective in intercultural communication and its interest in mutual and critical recognition of difference. There is not a pregiven principle of reason behind my idea of humanism, as Schmidt suspected, and no reference to Habermas. I see a mental drive working here, which can be perceived in the various forms of calling for freedom, which can be shared by everybody and the result of which, however, is open. I don't see any reason why these elements could not and should not be fostered in the humanities (as long as these deserve this name).