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CULTURAL SELF-COMPREHENSION AND COEXISTENCE PREREQUISITES FOR A FUNDAMENTAL DIALOGUE

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Translated from the German original

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This is an English translation of Hans Köchler's seminal 1972 treatise,

**"Kulturelles Selbstverständnis und Koexistenz:
Voraussetzungen für einen fundamentalen Dialog."**

In this text, Köchler introduces the philosophical framework for the "dialogue of civilizations," arguing that a culture can only truly understand itself through an encounter and "dialectic" with the "other"—different cultures and worldviews. The lecture, held at the University of Innsbruck (Austria) on 19 October 1972, launched the work of the newly established International Progress Organization (I.P.O.).

The original German text was first published in Hans Köchler (ed.), "Philosophie und Politik," Innsbruck: Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Wissenschaft und Politik, 1973, pp. 75-78.

Every context of action is based on an unquestioned, unthematic self-comprehension. By this, we mean the ideological and normative fundamental attitudes that give a typical character to an individual's life-orientation as well as a collective cultural attitude.

It is necessary to make this self-comprehension conscious and, through such a process of making it conscious, to first fully develop it. For only a reflected self-comprehension is a full self-comprehension. Only on this basis is a dialogue between different cultures possible.

Like self-awareness, self-comprehension—understood as the conscious structure of cultural creation in the most general sense, including ideological justification—is only possible through differentiation (distinction) from the "Other" (i.e., other forms of cultural realization). Every act of relating (relation) is essentially such a differentiation; determining one's own "essence," the self-interpretation of the principles of action in the most general sense, only becomes possible in terms of content through comparison and differentiation from other spheres. With a diversity of relations, self-comprehension becomes more mature and differentiated, gaining greater theoretical significance.

The concrete self-comprehension of a cultural circle or epoch always has two fundamental components: a normative and a descriptive one. Going beyond a mere statement of "this is just how we are" and an ideological awareness of the principles of action, it frequently includes a tendency toward the practical realization and propagation of one's own cultural self-realization. This applies to individuals as well as nations; in the case of the latter, it has significantly determined international politics.

Cultural self-comprehension, based on unthematic interpretations of meaning as a comprehensive horizon in which individual phenomena are embedded, is always multidimensional. It can be elaborated, for example, through its inclusion of and stance toward religious tradition, surrounding cultural traditions,

fundamental ethical questions, and the problems arising from social restructuring through technology, etc.

This self-comprehension—manifesting in certain general propositions cited as justification for concrete actions (e.g., the "performance principle" [*Leistungsprinzip*])—stands as a self-conception in interaction with self-presentation, which corresponds to a certain self-conception and in turn exerts a shaping influence upon it. This law is particularly effective in international cultural contacts.

As previously stated, self-comprehension (*Eigenverständnis*) is only possible through an "understanding of the other" (*Fremdverständnis*). There is a true interdependence here; one cannot be realized without the other. Only by differentiating myself from what is not myself (in this case: from foreign cultures) can I fully find myself; a culture can only fully grasp itself, comprehend the typicality of its own standpoint, and position itself within a larger (e.g., historical, ethnological) context. Thus, engaging with foreign cultures is an internal systematic condition for a reflected self-comprehension that can be practically accounted for in international contacts.

A fulfilled, accountable self-comprehension—significant both theoretically and practically—is ultimately only possible by breaking out of the context of "reception history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte / wirkungsgeschichtlicher Bedingungs-zusammenhang*) within one's own culture, i.e., through "confrontation" with cultural systems and traditions that do not belong to one's own historical horizon. Only by shattering the fateful "hermeneutic circle"—which consists of understanding oneself only in terms of what has previously shaped oneself and entered unthematically into one's "lived" self-comprehension—does the dialectic of cultural self-insight realize itself. Remaining within one's own effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) only allows for an "encounter with oneself" that lacks the foundation of differentiation.

This leads to significant consequences for the design of education, provided one is willing to take seriously the concern for an accountable self-comprehension that does not spring merely from unreflected historical mystifications. From this perspective, the concept of a "humanistic" education must be completely rethought: the general educational content conveyed must no longer relate solely to the horizon of the given self-comprehension arising from a respective "tradition". Education must not remain only within the immanence of effective-historical contexts. Rather, in its own interest, if it is to convey or promote a comprehensive, critical understanding of one's own standpoint, it must include the interpretation of foreign cultures in the course of study.

The fundamental question arises: to what extent can certain most general structural similarities be found between different cultural traditions and current cultural manifestations that might ground a universal self-comprehension of humanity today? This question is particularly relevant in the field of ethics—the problem of the ideological and thus ultimately political coexistence of differently structured systems. The principles formulated in the UN Charter seem to reflect such a general self-comprehension in the normative realm, regardless of different ideological contents.

However, an important distinction must be made: there are "first-order" ethical evaluations ("material evaluations") and "second-order" evaluations, which formulate the conditions for the free realization of primary evaluations within a pluralistic system based on mutual recognition (formal evaluations) (cf. also Hans Kelsen's approach). It is precisely in the interest of preserving the *diversity* of material evaluations that cohesiveness/unity (*Einheitlichkeit*) can be achieved regarding the latter (formal) evaluations. These second-order evaluations, however, contain no content-based statements about concrete ideologies or traditions.

Finding commonalities in the "material" sphere (e.g., views on the most adequate social self-realization of man, where socialist and capitalist systems differ greatly)

is likely to be far more difficult. Nonetheless, this is an essential concern of a universal philosophy and anthropology of culture that seeks to elaborate the "essential features" of human cultural creation.

Even if no universal commonality of self-comprehension can be demonstrated in concrete terms (except in the formal second-order realm), such a comparative analysis is a vital contribution to ideological dialogue and thus to "humanization". This humanization consists of insight into the limits of one's own position, a prerequisite for reducing aggressive attitudes by depriving them of their ideological justification. A distance—perhaps even a final irony and skepticism toward one's own standpoint—allows it to be recognized in its typical character and contributes to a more "objective" evaluation of an "other" standpoint.

If we measure the "development" of a state not merely by economic criteria but by cultural forms of expression, an apodictic value judgment is hardly possible. If one's own position can only be fully determined by including "foreign" positions, then individual cultural spheres must be granted a character of qualitative "independence" (*Eigenständigkeit*). They cannot be annexed into one's own cultural self-comprehension or evaluated only from within it. To do so would be to abandon any possibility of breaking out of the *circulus vitiosus* (vicious circle) of continuous self-confirmation.

As the cultural self-comprehension of a nation develops in interaction with "transcendent" cultural traditions, the effort to determine a culture's position is always already a **contribution to a global dialogue**. Differences then become not a reason for chauvinistic profiling (self-presentation), but a prerequisite for a deepened understanding of one's own position and thus an indication of the possibility of encountering a new aspect of cultural self-realization. This includes the reduction of aggressive attitudes and is a contribution to a universal policy of peace.

The task of acting concretely here falls above all to cultural foreign policy, which is more than just the "publicity-oriented" self-presentation of a national culture.

In particular, this is an opportunity for the cultural diplomacy of a neutral state, which could take a mediatory position between ideological blocks precisely due to its lack of entanglement in power politics.
