

# Education, spirituality and the 'great' existential questions

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(November '07)

## Contents

### Education, spirituality and the 'great' existential questions

Paul Ricoeur, interpreting reality

Of metaphors and symbols

- The metaphor
- The symbol
- The suspicion
- The relation of metaphor and symbol
- Education as the metaphoric potential of symbolic wealth

The itinerary of *reconnaissance*

- The establishment of knowledge
- Recognition in a reflexive sense
- Acknowledgement in the sense of gratitude
- An exciting learning process

Howard Gardner, frames of mind

The intelligences

Towards a new understanding of reality

Mind for the future

## **Education, spirituality and the 'great' existential questions**

In education we are always confronted with the paradox of distance and intimacy. We learn what is new, that is: beyond the horizon of what we know already – distance. We make this new realm our very own by learning, taking to heart – intimacy. And the experience of this paradox of learning is the prerequisite of every teaching situation. Bridging the gap between distance and appropriation becomes more and more difficult, especially in a postmodern culture where the awareness of distance - infinitely great and small – has grown exponentially in science and the humanities up to the unbearable. In Europe cultural awareness only adds to these difficulties. Will distance explode into infinity and are we left with a *solipsismus*, in which every individual will create his own reality, even universe where a common ground for truth and morality is inexistent? In such a limit situation the dialectics of distance and intimacy will have disappeared and teaching will no longer be of any use, because the subject will be imprisoned in its own scattered self.

Is there an alternative to this horror scenario that the postmodernists present us as our human future? An alternative in which the dialectics of distance and intimacy stay very much alive and promote new human intelligence of reality and ameliorate inter-cultural and inter-religious relationships? I think so and I search for help with regard to these questions in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the developmental psychology of Howard Gardner.

### **Paul Ricoeur, interpreting reality**

#### **Of metaphors and symbols**

We will first turn to Ricoeur's metaphor and symbol theory, which I hold for the center of his interpretation theory<sup>1</sup> and with which he gives an enormous amount of extra depth to the dialectics of distance and appropriation mentioned above. Through their interconnectedness metaphors and symbols explore deep layers of reality and can even reach pre-lingual, transcendental and religious layers of human existence. The starting point for Ricoeur however is always language, i.e. the narrow gate that leads to reality as it is, might have been, or may be some day. Epistemological analysis will lead us to the ontological *a priori*'s.

- ***The metaphor***

The metaphor is and is not what it indicates. Very often it contains a paradox that can go all the way to absurdity and thus forces us to consider reality in new ways. For Aristotle the metaphor worked on the level of single words and denomination. It was a style figure serving rhetoric, i.e. the writing of history, public speech and poetry. He defined the metaphor as “the transfer of a name on something that indicates something else as well; transfer of species to individual, of individual to species, or of individual to individual according to the relation of analogy” (Ricoeur, 1975, 19)<sup>2</sup>.

Ricoeur relates the metaphor to the basic entity of discourse, i.e. the linguistic sentence – *la phrase*. And there it does not create a deviation in the literal sense on the level of denomination. The metaphor functions as proclamation on the level of a linguistic sentence and creates a conflict between two different interpretations that are active in that sentence. So through creative imagination the metaphor brings together in one image two different worlds that used to contradict each other and this causes a shock. It is the shock of the discovery, the joy of the new insight that such an unthinkable connection does exist in the realms of thought and imagination. And that is why the living - that is new - metaphor is innovative, revolutionary and transcending barriers. A new image like this - as an answer to the tension between two conflicting interpretations inside a sentence - signifies an extension of meaning. And for Ricoeur this metaphorical force is operative in scientific models, historiography, literature as well as the arts, anywhere where thought is opened towards a new intelligence of reality.

- *The symbol*

The symbol has a double reality. First there is a direct literal meaning in which sparkles a hidden meaning rooted in being - good or bad - itself. The symbol is not a human creation of language or of images as is the metaphor. In the symbol the pre-lingual being gives itself in the language of the direct and literal meaning. The symbol does not try to capture or control evil prematurely in a myth in order to safeguard salvation. The symbol draws from the inexhaustible and hidden layers of meaning - good and bad - in being, which can only be named in a partial way by means of language.

Ricœur defines the symbol as follows: “every structure of meaning in which a direct, primary, literal sense indicates another indirect, secondary, figurative sense that can only be apprehended in and through the first” (Ricœur, 1969, 16)<sup>3</sup>. A symbol only becomes *symbol* when it is expressed in language. However where metaphor is language creation, a giving of meaning to the surrounding world, the symbol reveals the dynamic of receiving meaning from a deep and hidden, even pre-lingual reality. Through the symbol man is related to reality that consists of many layers of sense. The force of the symbol is delivered in language from the deep and hidden layers of sense that root in extra lingual realms as “the holy”, “the lust”, “the cosmos” and Ricœur concludes: *le symbol donne à penser*, the symbol gives rise to thought (Ricœur, 1960, 323, cf. 1969, 284)<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that all is said already – although maybe in riddles – and that all has to be started again in the dimension of thought. In fact, for Ricœur the symbol and symbolism, with its double structure of meaning, is so important that in *Le conflit des interprétations* he closely linked the whole hermeneutical project with it (cf. Ricœur, 1969, 8-28 esp. 16)<sup>5</sup>.

Before any theology or speculation of a more mythical character we already find symbols related to the direct experience of meaning – the primary symbols. In the symbolism of evil we can distinguish between the magical view: evil as stain; the ethical view: evil as deviation; and the more internalized view: evil as burden. These symbols are formed with the aid of bearers of meaning borrowed from the experience of nature (contact, orientation in space, weight). These primary symbols show the double intentional structure of the symbol. Through the literal meaning – material stain, deviation in space and experience of burden – they aim, beyond themselves, at receiving meaning that concerns man embedded in the realm of “the holy”: the polluted creature, the sinner, the guilty one. So the symbol aims at something *as* stain, *as* deviation, *as* burden and that is what constitutes its inexhaustible depth. “The symbol is the movement of a primary (literal, JCV) sense that makes us participate in the latent (hidden, secondary, JCV) sense and thus assimilates us to what is symbolized, without us being able to control the similarity intellectually”. This is how and why the symbol gives; “it gives because it is a primary intentionality that gives a secondary sense”. (Ricœur, 1969, 286)

For Ricœur there are three categories that express the relation between the experience of evil and grace - in the symbolic sense - and here we enter the realm of mythical symbols: the “in spite of”, the “thanks to” and the “how much more”. The “in spite of” is a real category of hope and absolution. Reconciliation is expected *in spite of* evil. It cannot be proven or organized only hoped for. Its home is not a system but a story (a myth), not a logic but an eschatology. However, this “in spite of” is also a “thanks to”. The Principle of Things does serve grace with and *thanks to* evil. But this is and will remain a mystery since we do not dispose of absolute knowledge of neither realm. But finally there is St. Paul’s “how much more” (in Romans 5,20): “where sin multiplied, *how much more* grace became abundant”, encompassing both the “in spite of” and the “thanks to”. Pseudo solutions of hasty rationalizations and mythologies like Gnosticism that pretended to be able to reign over evil by means of “knowledge” are transformed into hopeful comprehension. We no longer have to control evil in its abysmal depths by means of all sorts of rational symbolisms. That is beyond our powers. On the other hand we don’t have to recoil in horror either, because in the midst of evil we find the hopeful comprehension of the “how much more” of grace that will give us our highest rational symbols.

In religions, symbols appear on a regular basis. This could be expected because symbols affecting man in relation to “the Holy” appear in manifold ways in religious Scriptures, symbols of evil as well as symbols of grace. And since fear has been replaced by hope, the search for hidden meaning – in a negative or in a positive sense - can go very far and reach some kind of synthesis of evil and grace. However, not only in religious realms, also in psychoanalysis, chaos theory, quantum mechanics, etc. symbolic wealth comes to the surface.

- ***The suspicion***

Ever since Descartes, we doubt things as they are because we know things appear differently than they really are. However, Descartes did not make us doubt consciousness, which is how it appears. Since the hermeneutics of suspicion - Marx, Freud and Nietzsche - we have begun to doubt whether meaning and our direct consciousness of meaning are identical. The masters of suspicion have shown us how we misguide ourselves with all sorts of false arguments and how we imagine reality differently than how it really is. By exposing the false arguments they open the way for more authenticity and truth, not only by means of destruction, but also by inventing the “art of interpretation”.

In the place of direct consciousness the masters of suspicion put an exegesis of meaning hidden in the expressions of direct consciousness. Through the suspicion of the facades a deep hidden meaning, obscured by the facades, will be liberated. They try to let the method of their investigations coincide with their object, which means that to find a meaning of something has become interpretation: we will have to decipher that in which the hidden meaning expresses itself. And here we find an analogy with symbolic knowledge, through the literal, primary sense we can reach a deeper, hidden sense. Always on a provisional basis, sure, and this means that we will never find the whole truth, we will have to be modest about our knowledge. However, our knowledge will nevertheless increase and our consciousness will continue to be enlarged. When method and object coincide, the fundamental category of consciousness is “hide and show”. Restless coincidence of the two realms is not possible, but the attempt to achieve it remains a constant endeavor for the hermeneutics of suspicion.

- ***The relation of metaphor and symbol***

Metaphors are usually organized in a network consisting of basic and derived metaphors. The basic or prime metaphors (God as the Eternal One) hold the derived ones – borrowed from different fields of human experience, God as Father, King, Husband, Lord, Shepherd – together and keep them in balance and alive. In their capacity to attract derived metaphors basic metaphors can initiate an infinite number of potential interpretations on the conceptual level. And thus a hierarchy develops in the network of metaphors comparable to the hierarchy in the realm of the symbol (primary, mythic and rational symbols) and it appears that, on each level of both hierarchies, the symbol asks for the cooperation of the metaphor. And so metaphors can be seen as elaborations of the “material” supplied by symbols.

Symbols have a *surplus of meaning* that Ricœur sees as “a residue of the literary interpretation” (Ricœur, 1976, 55). This surplus concerns a vast and enormous field of meaning. Many different disciplines and arts are doing research into these fields, all using different symbols. Moreover, not all meaning present in the hidden layers of the symbol can be interpreted directly by language because it belongs to pre-lingual and even pre-semantic layers of meaning. And so certain tensions between what can be known by science or used in the arts or “felt” in religion and what cannot, will always remain. Although in the symbol assimilation of the two realms is operative, while in the metaphor creation of new reality by means of language is operative, the tension in the symbol can best be compared with the tension that works in the metaphor.

Symbolic systems can be represented as a reservoir full of meaning of which the metaphoric potential still has to be expressed. Symbolic experiences ask to be given meaning and this request is answered by the metaphor in a limited and finite way. Therefore metaphors are more and are less than symbols. They are more, because what remains obscure in the symbol - pre-semantic and pre-linguistic layers of meaning and the infinite correspondence of the elements - is brightened by the tension in the metaphorical expression. On the other hand the metaphor is less, because it is no more than a linguistic procedure in which the symbolic wealth is deposited. “Metaphors are only the linguistic surface of symbols and they owe their power to relate the semantic layer with the pre-semantic layers in the depths of human experience to the two-dimensional structure of the symbol” (Ricœur, 1976, 69). So the metaphor can reveal deep and hidden meaning, but because of the surplus of meaning in the symbol this metaphoric activity will always remain limited and provisional.

- ***Education as the metaphoric potential of symbolic wealth***

Ricoeur’s metaphor and symbol theory has some interesting and important implications for education.

First, truth is always something we participate in, but never own. Second, language refers to reality, be it in a partial and provisional way. Language is not a game à la Derrida in which language only refers to itself and its internal differences. Language is connected to meaning of and within reality. It receives meaning through the symbol, it creates meaning with the metaphor.

When Feuerbach stated that ‘man made God in his image’ Ricoeur would partially agree. Religions operate on the level of the metaphor that expresses the interpretation of the primary, mythical and rational meaning received from the symbolic reality. Religions - and the cultures they emerge from - give meaning to the eternal struggle of good and evil, but always on a provisional basis. No quick rationalizations nor ‘total’ solutions of the symbolic reality and struggles are allowed, there is always more beneath the surface that could shatter our understanding. There is freedom, room for new interpretations, new religions, new theologies as becomes very clear in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well. And this freedom is guaranteed by the surplus of meaning in reality that can never be mastered rationally in a complete or total way.

However, reality has its own laws that pop up in the symbol. One cannot say anything about anything. Reality demands a certain loyalty. This implies that every attempt to describe that reality should be taken seriously. Like in art only abstraction from techniques that you master makes abstract art an *art*. So creating a new religion, a new culture, cannot be done without thorough knowledge of the traditions and the cultures that you are using – or decide not to - for your new metaphor. Only then you can discover what symbolic wealth is hidden in the reality at a distance, in the other as other. The quality of respect towards what is given as an other feature of reality correlates directly with the quality of the new religion, culture that is created. Only then, reality as a whole that sparkles in the symbols, may participate in your new creation. If the reality that pops up in the symbols of the different traditions is absent, then the creator will soon be imprisoned in his own scattered self, in which community has become impossible. Here education has an important job to do.

### **The itinerary of *reconnaissance***

The dictionary gives 23 different meanings for the French word ‘*reconnaissance*’. Given this baffling amount of signification Ricoeur was very much surprised that no serious philosophical work had ever been dedicated to this multi-vocal concept. And he filled the gap towards the end of his life with a book called *Parcours de la reconnaissance*<sup>6</sup>. For me this itinerary is an implementation of the metaphor and symbol theory that can be made fertile for education in a postmodern society going through a deep identity crisis. Ricoeur distinguishes three main meanings of the word *reconnaissance*: the establishment of knowledge, recognition in a reflexive sense, and acknowledgement in the sense of gratitude.

- ***The establishment of knowledge***

When Copernicus discovered in the sixteenth century that not the earth but the sun was the center of the universe, then all of a sudden everything was different of what had been thought up to that moment. As a result someone like Descartes started – in the seventeenth century - to doubt everything. Only the mere fact that he doubted could not be doubted and so he concluded: *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. And that means that being is based upon individual thought and knowledge. Real knowledge is the univocal meaning that I give to reality with clear and distinct concepts – identification by means of *idées claires et distinctes*. This knowledge has produced in Western society many new sciences and technologies, only this form of knowledge has become more and more problematic in modern times.

- ***Recognition in a reflexive sense***

Elsewhere I have argued that Kant tried to save objective knowledge by introducing the universal subject and failed.<sup>7</sup> There is no such thing as a universal subject in one logical system since there is plurality in humanity and distance between human beings in time, space, culture, religion, nationality and so on. Therefore self-evidence – that is: for any ‘subject’ – does not exist either. Consequently the unique logical system of pre-modern times, the ancient Greek *logos*, collapsed and especially after

Kant's failure modernity started to develop a whole range of new logical systems (Leibniz, Frege etc.) Truth would now depend on the logical system being used and 'true' or 'certain' knowledge became problematic. A gap appeared between object and subject, objectivity and subjectivity moved away from each other.

Ricoeur does not deny that Kant leaves us with a whole series of dichotomies and unsolvable paradoxes but he is more gentle towards Kant's way of doing philosophy. He says that in his search for objective knowledge Kant discovered subjectivity. What matters now is to distinguish good from bad objectivity and good from bad subjectivity. Good objectivity pertains to human reality. Good subjectivity is the willingness to leave one's own situation, social system, cultural prejudice, to reach out for the other, cross the alienating distance and be changed by what is on the other side of that distance. It is especially through experienced alienation that self-consciousness – that is: real reflexivity - arises. Know yourself through the other as other, submit to the unexpected, put yourself at the other's disposal, that is good subjectivity in which its bad form (i.e. to stay put in your own closed systems) is overcome. And here we enter the realm of inter-subjectivity, in which the good form of objectivity is rescued because the definition of objectivity is transferred from the logical into the ethical realm.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely the realm of responsibility and the promise that Kant placed in his concept of *Rekognition*, important tool for the practical reason. For self-knowledge I need the other, reflexivity feeds on reciprocity.

- ***Acknowledgement in the sense of gratitude***

So the relation is back in Western thought, but it is a problematic relation in which the initial problem that we started with – the paradox of distance and intimacy – returns in all its force. Modern science has discovered distance in a way that tantalizes imagination. We realize that reality is infinitely greater than we had ever thought and with the discovery of many more solar systems than our own we lose the feeling of a center to which I can relate. Kant already sensed this in his concept of the - unknowable - *Ding an sich* and Ricoeur tries to solve his unsolved dichotomies by means of Hegel's dialectics. The tension in the paradox between conflicting opposites can be made fruitful, but on one condition, i.e. that we refrain from Hegel's totalitarian system in which the absolute spirit returns to itself. So Ricoeur applies Hegel's dialectical system only to human reality for it precisely in human reality that opposites (thesis and antithesis) penetrate each other and produce a new synthesis. Always on a partial and provisional basis, so that the new synthesis becomes a thesis and can start the whole process again. In this way the system of knowledge will never close in itself but will continue to grow. Moreover, the tension in a living paradox always produces energy that can be used to continue the ongoing process of learning.

The important message of phenomenology: postpone your judgment about reality as it appears in the phenomena at the surface, is very much in line with this way of thinking. Reality is greater than can be covered by our prejudices. Structural analysis made a step in this direction to find deep meaning below the surface of apparent structures. And in ontology Heidegger turns the Cartesian cogito upside down; *sum ergo cogito*, I am and therefore I think. Not the fact that I think and know (epistemology) is the ground of my being (ontology) but the mere fact that I exist facilitates my thinking, my knowing. My existence was given to me without my consent. The way I fill my existence is a matter of personal choice, but then again I will use many things that others have done before and for me. Culture, environment, education determine and restrain my existence. My knowing is recognition of the other in myself, remaining within the familiar contexts in which I have been situated.

Ricoeur goes a step further. He places epistemology and ontology in a dialectical relation that is paralleled in the dialectical relation of metaphor and symbol. Epistemology operative in language creation will lead beyond itself to the vast field of received meaning, that is: the infinite and open system of ontological *a priori*'s. And there human thought can be enriched by the other as Lévinas presented him, new, unknown, at an alienating distance, calling for responsible compassion. So the univocal individual giving of meaning is completed by the acknowledgement of reciprocal receiving of meaning in relationships. You may have to fight for recognition in different contexts, but once it is given your point will be acknowledged in that context. From that point on, Ricoeur takes us another step further and invites us to be grateful towards the other with regard to everything you received from

her. That is the last and most fruitful meaning of the word *reconnaissance*. In gratitude you accept your dependence on the other, but you do not experience this dependence as a lack of freedom. It becomes a safe basis on which your willingness to open yourself to new consciousness of what is outside the familiar contexts can grow. On that basis more and better understanding beyond cultural and other borders may develop.

- *An exciting learning process*

Instead of ending up in the postmodern nihilism in which Western thought appears to implode with philosophers like Derrida and Lyotard, who hold respectively that ‘truth’ and ‘morality’ are inexistent, Ricoeur chooses another itinerary. The itinerary of grateful reception of meaning that stimulates the creation of new meaning. And I couldn’t agree more. It is an itinerary that is perfectly compatible with Ricoeur’s way of thinking, dialectically and ethically. To receive with gratitude is not a passive affair. I de-place myself into another person, which is very difficult because I have to put my own filters out of order, if only temporarily. But in doing so I permit whole new consciousness to enter my mind that could change me thoroughly. And this is an exciting learning process that leads me beyond my initial prejudices. Furthermore, by integrating gratitude in my receiving of what the other has to offer, I will stimulate the other to share with me what is valuable to him. I create a possibility for the other to give, to do good. And with that I can make yet a whole range of other persons happy.

What I observe in Western thought and culture – worldwide and in Europe in a more condensed and intense form – are two movements, one external (centrifugal) and the other internal (centripetal). The centrifugal movement shows up for instance in the itinerary of *Europe MCI* – a project on educational renewal: identity, family and friends, good work, migration and mobility, and otherness. This movement is consistent with the general development of Western thought: (political) borders are crossed or eliminated, (logical) systems open themselves to a wider reality. Ricoeur would call this good subjectivity, but there is a limit: the point where every common ground is lost and postmodernists start to deny the existence of truth and morality. There, reality consists of infinitely large and small distances, but when concrete distance is annihilated in infinity, intimacy will disappear as well: identity is an illusion. This may be a logical conclusion of modern western thought, but it presents for many a nightmare: loss of tradition, loss of religion, loss of identity. And so fear engenders the movement in the opposite direction. In the centripetal movement we see the closing of systems, the fighting for preservation of culture, civilisation, religion, tradition, dialect, identity, in short: the massive preoccupation with the self instead of the other. As in the centrifugal movement, distance threatens to disappear as well in the limit situation of the centripetal movement and so will intimacy. When systems – virtual or concrete – close, they imprison everything inside, until the subject will be imprisoned in its own scattered self. Ricoeur would call this bad subjectivity.

Ricoeur’s itinerary of *reconnaissance* manoeuvres in between these two opposites and in doing so he keeps the paradox of distance and intimacy very much alive. Identification by means of clear and distinct ideas does tell us something real about reality. Subjectivity should not be a matter of -exploding – logics but of ethics. And gratitude makes inter-subjectivity – my self in relation to the other – possible. The masters of suspicion should be taken seriously – and Lyotard is one of them. Heidegger *has* been a member of the nazi party and he *did* mention the *Endlösung* after World War II as an example how to technically solve agricultural problems. And yes, there is terror in Western culture, but not to the degree that morality is non-existent, so that Hitler’s crimes can be denied, or -worse - that he may be portrayed as a clown, without any historical consciousness whatsoever. Instead of dishonouring the clown gratitude demands the celebration of the clown. Because it is he, who proclaims the ‘joy of yes into the grief of finiteness’<sup>9</sup>.

Well then, I think that the enormous tension in the paradox of nowadays Western thought and culture, and the resulting energy can be made fertile to make the world better a place. And I also think that education has an important role to play in that process. If only to keep the paradox of distance and intimacy alive, by gratefully receiving symbolic wealth in language and creating new reality with adequate metaphors. And all that in a spirit of good subjectivity. Here Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences have been a great help.

## Howard Gardner, frames of mind

Different cultures function according to different frames of mind in which different intelligences that use different senses are favored. Howard Gardner has explained this very well in his book *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*.<sup>10</sup> His point is that Western culture, at least since the rise of the Greek city-state, has always stressed “the existence and importance of mental powers: *rationality*, *intelligence*, or the deployment of *mind*. The unending search for an essence of humanity has led, with seeming ineluctability, to a focus upon our species quest for knowledge; and those capacities that figure in knowing have been especially valued.” (Gardner, 1984, 5) Based on neurobiological analysis and developmental psychology research in a wide variety of individuals in different personal, social and cultural settings Gardner concludes that the human mind, in general, accommodates more intelligences than just the one referred to in terms like “bright”, “smart”, or “clever”. This becomes particularly clear when we look at other, non-Western, cultures where other intelligences are employed to survive in the struggles of life.

What then does Gardner consider intelligence? “... a human intellectual competence must entail a set of skills of problem solving – enabling the individual *to resolve genuine problems or difficulties* that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product – and must also entail the potential for *finding or creating problems* – thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge” (ibid., 60/1). Various mixes of different intelligences can accomplish this work, of which Gardner distinguishes and discusses six<sup>11</sup>: the linguistic, the musical, the spatial, the logical-mathematical, the bodily-kinesthetic, and the personal intelligences. “What I am calling for here are sets of intelligences which meet certain biological and psychological specifications. ... Thus a prerequisite for a theory of multiple intelligences, as a whole, is that it captures a reasonably complete gamut of the kinds of abilities valued by human cultures. We must account for the skills of a shaman and psychoanalyst as well as of a yogi and saint.” (Ibid., 62)

### The intelligences

The auditory and oral elements then are operative in both language and music. “What they share is an existence that is not closely tied to the world of physical objects (in contrast to spatial and logical-mathematical forms of intelligence) and an essence that is equally remote from the world of other persons (as manifest in various forms of personal intelligence).” Yet both forms, linguistic and musical intelligence, have their own autonomy. “... the fact that deaf individuals can acquire natural language – and can also devise or master gestural systems – serves as decisive proof that linguistic intelligence is not simply a form of auditory intelligence.” Language is not a function of sight either because “the linguistic decoding capacity proves robust despite massive injury to the visual-spatial centers of the brain”, while “reading is invariably disturbed by injury to the language system”. Therefore linguistic intelligence has its own autonomy. So does the musical intelligence, described by Gardner as – “the abilities of individuals to discern *meaning* and *importance* in sets of pitches rhythmically arranged and also to produce such metrically arranged pitch sequences as a means of communicating with other individuals. These capacities also rely heavily on auditory-oral abilities – indeed, they prove even less susceptible to visual translation than does language; and yet, counter to intuition, musical abilities are mediated by separate parts of the nervous system and consist of separate sets of competence.” (Ibid., 98)

The logical-mathematical and spatial intelligences are more orientated towards vision, although they can also develop in individuals without direct access to the visual world. Blind people can have spatial intelligence just like deaf people can have linguistic intelligence. Both intelligences connected to vision are mutually linked in areas as chess, engineering and architecture. “Central to spatial intelligence are the capacities to perceive the visual world accurately, to perform transformations and modifications upon one’s initial perceptions, and to be able to recreate aspects of one’s visual experience, even in the absence of relevant physical stimuli” (ibid., 173) - this limit situation of spatial intelligence is present at the drawing table of the architect. Logical mathematical intelligence on the other hand is about reasoning in long – numerical - chains and geometrical forms. “Beginning in the material world, the individual moves toward increasingly abstract formal systems, whose interconnections become matters of logic rather than empirical observation” (ibid., 135). When applied

to music (which was already done by Pythagoras) the mathematician is concerned with form, music is just another pattern and not - as for the musician - patterned elements appearing in sound, put together in certain ways in order to have expressive power and effects. (Ibid., 127) Logical-mathematical intelligence has its own autonomy, as the other intelligences do, with its own ordering mechanisms. Where logical-mathematical intelligence “concludes its developmental trajectory with increasing abstraction, spatial intelligence remains tied fundamentally to the concrete world of objects and their location in the world” (ibid., 204).

Finally, we have the bodily-kinesthetic and the personal intelligences where all the senses cooperate to find and create meaning. “Bodily intelligence, which, focusing inward, is limited to the exercise of one’s own body, and facing outward, entails physical actions on the objects in the world” (ibid., 235). It is, like the logical-mathematical and spatial intelligences, object related. The dancer and the athlete use their bodies as objects, and inventors and other workers use parts of the body – particularly hands – in order to manipulate, arrange and transform objects in the world. But the body is more than a simple object. “It is also the vessel of the individual’s sense of self, his most personal feelings and aspirations, as well as that entity to which others respond in a special way because of their uniquely human qualities. ... While still poorly understood, the realm of the personal intelligences is clearly of utmost importance to humans, the site of our most awesome accomplishments, as well as of our most terrifying tendencies.”(Ibid., 235/6) And what applied to the other intelligences applies even more to the personal intelligences. “There will be universal features of any sense of person or self, but also considerably cultural nuances, reflecting a host of historical and individuating factors” (ibid., 276).

### **Towards a new understanding of reality**

Well then, the individual intelligences may rely heavily on certain senses – the first pair on the ear, the second pair on the eye, the last pair on all the senses – they do not coincide with them completely. Every individual intelligence has and keeps its own autonomy and value. From a neurobiological perspective, there is no intelligence that is more important, more basic, and that therefore reigns over the other intelligences. In Western society the logical-mathematical intelligence has always been given this privileged status in a conceptual and in a practical sense. It has *therefore* strongly influenced the development of Western culture. (Cf. ibid., 167) However, since the breakdown of the solid univocal house of *logos*, logic in itself has become fragmentized and no longer rules it “all”. Now there is room for other logical systems and, in the same line of reasoning, for other intelligences. And so we should realize that culture, conventions and tradition determine what intelligence is chosen as the predominant one, the one that helps best to solve the problems of life and discover new reality.

The Greeks may have chosen space and vision as their primordial mode of thought and with it they developed their culture to great heights that thoroughly influenced Western civilization in subsequent eras. But this does not mean that Western civilization has a privilege on spatial or logical - mathematical intelligence. Gardner gives a beautiful example of the highly sophisticated navigation skills of the Paluwat people of the Caroline Islands in the South Seas that fill Western navigators with awe (cf. ibid., 202/3). Furthermore, time and hearing are not only important to the Hebrews. Among the Tshidi in Botswana the effective power of a chief is determined by his performance in public debates, carefully analyzed by members of the group afterwards. And here, in oral discourse, not only linguistic features are important but also the accompanying body language; and they are developed into highly sophisticated skills as well (cf. ibid., 94/5). In short the human brain accommodates all these different autonomous intelligences without any preference and it is the culture that decides which one of them will be used preferably. In the end it is a matter of *power* which culture will grow above and dominate the others and will thus determine which intelligence is favored and used most. However, this preference is culturally determined and is *not* principally anchored in neurobiology, although a privileged set of intelligences will be deposited in and passed on by the genes.

So, we can start looking for new ways on which a world population can develop with mutual exchange of cultures, religions and traditions, an exchange of intelligences and worldviews based on mutual respect and responsibility for the wellbeing of the other. And I think education has a primary role to play in this process. Lyotard may be right to equalize morality with that ‘cloud of terror that hides in the limpid blue of language’<sup>12</sup>, but I would prefer to concentrate his axiom on Western

civilization: isn't there already a form of terror active when a culture prefers one intelligence at the cost of all the other ones? In other words, when logical-mathematical intelligence leads to postmodern nihilism, Western culture can try linguistic and musical intelligence in order to *hear* new songs coming from beyond the imaginary borderlines of its own systems of thought. Why not open our systems of intelligence to find new meaning coming from beyond our mind borders? There is so much to receive out there with gratitude. Dance the circle and the square in its adequate paces to teach math. Sing poetry to teach literature. Go horse riding to teach leadership. Use symbols to explain the different layers of meaning in reality and teach students to recognize them as such, that is: familiar, in other - that is: non-familiar - religions. Create new religion to teach culture. Combine the intelligences to teach philosophy. Permit the other to enter the intimacy of your heart. And show respect with real attention for the values at stake, show responsible compassion with adequate knowledge of what you would like to change, in a modest and respectful way. Only then the paradox of distance and intimacy will stay very much alive, give rise to all kinds of new struggles, but also create new energy to tackle the real problems of our planet in this very moment of its history.

## Mind for the future

Gardner wrote a new book recently called *Five Minds for the Future*<sup>13</sup> in which he explores five different mindsets that humanity will need in the near future. Before the publication of the book I had the occasion to ask him the following questions about this subject:

- How do the five minds – discipline, synthesis, creativity, respect and ethics – relate to the multiple intelligences described in *Frames of Mind* – space, logical-mathematics, language, music, body and person? It seems that the intelligences (from space through body) belong to discipline and on certain conditions to synthesis as well, and that the intelligence pertaining to the whole person shows up in respect and ethics. However, this would leave the creative mind as an empty box yet to be filled.
- The synthesis more than the distinction of the multiple intelligences seems to be the main goal of both *Frames of Minds* and *Five Minds for the Future*. Creativity is described in the latter as a synthesis that is 'useful' and that brings us in a utilitarian sort of ethics. Now, who will determine what is useful? In the US discipline is useful while in Europe creativity has to be promoted. Usefulness is different for each culture – in terms of tradition and problem solving - and therefore power struggles will result. What is the function of respect in this realm and how will it direct and overcome power struggles on an intercultural and global scale?
- Is there any room for spirituality in this dialectical model of developing respectful and ethical synthesis and if so what will be that role?

In his answer he told me that in his field – of developmental psychology - he prefers to speak of the 'great existential questions' rather than of spirituality. The creativity to develop a useful synthesis contains more than just utilitarian ethics and should certainly address these great existential questions as well. So let me try to fill the creative mind in a European way.

I like to distinguish - with Ricoeur – three levels that pertain to the human mind: progress, ambiguity and hope<sup>14</sup>. Progress then pertains to the realm of tools developed in the different cultures and passed on to the next generations in traditional systems. These tools can be technical, used in food production, but also spiritual used in shamanist rituals or sophisticated theologies. They have come to us through educational systems as a massive and accumulated body of knowledge and skills, in which the free will of us humans living now and here is completely absent. Our free will becomes active on the level of ambiguity, where we have to decide what we will do with that legacy, what we will accept, deny, use or skip, alter or copy, open or close, enlarge or diminish. This is the field of struggle, success and failure, power and dependence, responsibility and culpability, the field of the great existential questions with no guarantee of a successful ending. And if we refuse to accept the postmodern loss of meaning and moral and want to keep the paradox of distance and intimacy alive, then these struggles will keep coming. In fact they lead to fierce battles already on a worldwide scale. However, there is a third level, the level of hope, the 'how much more' of the mythical symbolism so very much alive in

the Christian faith of the New Testament: no belief in evil, but in salvation. That was the kind of spirituality I meant in my question.

How to overcome desperation? With *espérance*, a faith in the good intentions of what the German-American theologian Paul Tillich called the 'God beyond gods' and in – after a word of Jean Nabert – *l'affirmation originaire*. I believe that from this original affirmation a new culture can emerge. A culture, in which world religions enrich each other. A culture, in which new combinations of intelligences stimulate the creation of new living metaphors and new insights in the inexhaustible symbolic wealth of reality. A culture, in which teachers remain student all their lives and share with their students what they find essential in the learning process of the whole learning community, as Parker Palmer describes it so beautifully in his book *The Courage to Teach*<sup>15</sup>.

I think that education can - and should - start a peaceful revolution in the existing status quo of the international community. Here and there I see it happen in what I like to call 'the new economy'. With the internet and the latest information technology a whole new turn has been given to the concept of *scarcity*. When I give away money my total amount of money will decrease. When I give away information I loose nothing. I keep my information in my mind and enrich others with it, who in turn will enrich me further with their reactions. I see corporations prefer the wellbeing of their workers above maximum profits in their corporate goals. I see economic activity, in which honest wages are paid based on added value instead of power or position. Free exchange on the internet of scientific and other knowledge, abolition of copyrights. Self acceptance, with gratitude and joy, because we realize that we have received so much more than we will ever be able to give. Love that lets the other shine. Human dignity for the downtrodden and oppressed. Equality in men-women relationships. Network activity in which real questions are asked and real problems of our global village are tackled. Being a teacher I cannot imagine a more rewarding task to stimulate these trends to further development. For to me education has a triple responsibility: 1) to be loyal to the massive body of knowledge and skills received from the past through the traditions and the disciplines; 2) to create new insights based on this expertise so that new layers of meaning can reach the human mind from the inexhaustible depths of a shared symbolic wealth, and 3) to keep the flame of hope burning.

The exciting adventure of creating new meaning with the metaphor, the inexhaustible wealth of the symbol, the opening of systems with good – that is: respectful, responsible and grateful - subjectivity, new intelligence of reality ... Who will we choose as our guide on this uncertain itinerary into the future, fear of chaos or love for life? I would suggest: let's give love a chance ...

Gasselte, November, '07  
Jan Chr. Vaessen

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory, discourse and the surplus of meaning*, Fort Worth Texas, 1976

<sup>2</sup> P. Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, Paris, 1975

<sup>3</sup> P. Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, Paris, 1969

<sup>4</sup> P. Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté, Finitude et Culpabilité. II. La symbolique du mal*, Paris, 1960

<sup>5</sup> 'Cette circonscription des expressions à double sens constitue proprement le champ herméneutique. En retour, le concept d'interprétation reçoit, lui aussi, une acceptation déterminée; je propose lui donner même extension qu'au symbole. L'interprétation, dirons-nous, est le travail de pensée qui consiste à déchiffrer le sens caché dans le sens apparent, à déployer les niveaux de signification impliqués dans la signification littérale.' (This description of expressions with double sense constitutes the very field of hermeneutics. In turn the concept of interpretation receives itself as well a determined acceptance; I propose to give it the same extension as [I gave (JCV)] to the symbol. Interpretation, we say, is the work of the mind that consists of deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning in order to deploy the levels of signification that are implied within the literal signification.) (Ricœur, 1969, 16)

<sup>6</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance, trois études*, Paris, 2004

<sup>7</sup> J.C. Vaessen, *A Quest for Hope*, 2005, unpublished

<sup>8</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, Paris, 1967, 39

<sup>9</sup> 'L'homme est la joie du oui dans la tristesse du fini.' Thème soutenant le Colloque à Rennes (France) les 18 et 19 octobre, 2007. Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort*, Paris, 2007

<sup>10</sup> H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, New York, 1983

<sup>11</sup> Later on Gardner will add more, but I restrict myself here to the intelligences mentioned in *Frames of Mind*

<sup>12</sup> F. Lyotard, *Heidegger et les 'juifs'*, Paris, 1988, p. 64

<sup>13</sup> H. Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future*, Boston, 2006

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, Paris, 1967, 93-112

<sup>15</sup> P. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, San Francisco, 1998