

The Relevance of Charles Taylor's Hermeneutics to Interculturalism at Indonesia In Mediating Between Essentialist And Anti-Essentialist Cultural Views: An Ontological Analysis

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Abstract

Indonesia's extraordinary cultural diversity presents persistent challenges in managing intercultural relations. Existing theoretical approaches to culture often oscillate between two extremes: cultural essentialism, which treats culture as fixed and immutable, and anti-essentialism, which dissolves cultural identity into fluid and contingent constructions. Both positions prove inadequate for addressing Indonesia's dynamic intercultural reality. This article aims to demonstrate that Charles Taylor's hermeneutical philosophy provides a robust ontological framework capable of mediating between these extremes. Employing an ontological analysis centered on the philosophical category of substance, the study examines Taylor's key concepts, particularly humans as self-interpreting animals and the fusion of horizons. The analysis shows that Taylor's hermeneutics allows for the recognition of cultural continuity without reification, while simultaneously affirming cultural dynamism without falling into relativism. This framework enables what the article terms critical interculturalism an approach that preserves cultural authenticity while fostering meaningful intercultural dialogue. The findings suggest that Taylor's hermeneutical ontology offers significant theoretical contributions to intercultural studies in Indonesia and provides normative guidance for cultural policy, education, and intercultural governance in plural democratic societies.

Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Interculturalism, Cultural Essentialism, Ontology, Indonesia, Charles Taylor*

Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. Its social landscape is shaped by the coexistence of hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, religious traditions, and local value systems that have evolved through long historical processes. This plurality constitutes not only a cultural asset but also a persistent challenge in maintaining social cohesion and meaningful intercultural relations (Kymlicka, 2020; Meer, Modood, & Zapata-Barrero, 2021). Tensions arising from ethnic stereotyping, religious exclusivism, and competing claims of cultural authenticity demonstrate that cultural diversity, if not conceptually well understood, can become a source of social fragmentation rather than enrichment (Arifianto, 2022).

Within academic and policy discourses, cultural diversity is often approached through two opposing theoretical orientations: cultural essentialism and cultural anti-essentialism. Cultural essentialism treats culture as possessing fixed and intrinsic characteristics that determine the identity, values, and behavior of its members. Such an approach emphasizes internal homogeneity and clear cultural boundaries (Sen, 2020). In the Indonesian context, essentialist thinking is visible in rigid ethnic classifications, claims of religious purity, and narratives that equate cultural identity with immutable tradition (Burhani, 2021). While essentialism may offer a sense of stability and continuity, recent studies show that it frequently legitimizes exclusionary practices and symbolic violence in plural societies (Hoon, 2023).

Conversely, cultural anti-essentialism emerges as a critical response to these dangers. Influenced by post-structuralist and constructivist perspectives, anti-essentialism emphasizes the fluidity, hybridity, and historical contingency of cultural identities (Hall, 2021). Culture is understood as socially constructed and continuously negotiated rather than inherited as a fixed essence. Although this approach effectively challenges stereotyping and cultural determinism, several scholars argue that

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radical anti-essentialism tends to dissolve cultural meaning into relativism, thereby weakening shared normative orientations necessary for intercultural coexistence (Meer et al., 2021; Modood, 2022).

This unresolved tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism reveals a theoretical gap in contemporary intercultural studies. Both perspectives capture important dimensions of culture, yet neither is sufficient to address the lived reality of intercultural interaction in plural societies such as Indonesia. Recent intercultural scholarship increasingly emphasizes the need for a mediating framework that can recognize cultural continuity without reification, while simultaneously affirming cultural dynamism without collapsing into arbitrariness (Zapata-Barrero, 2020; Kymlicka, 2023).

This article argues that the hermeneutical philosophy of Charles Taylor offers such a mediating framework. Recent philosophical discussions have revisited Taylor's hermeneutics as a viable alternative to both essentialist and constructivist extremes, particularly in debates on identity, recognition, and multicultural governance (Abbey, 2020; Rosa, 2022). Taylor's conception of human beings as self-interpreting animals situates culture within an ontological account of meaning-making, where identities are neither static substances nor arbitrary constructions.

Through concepts such as strong evaluation and the fusion of horizons, Taylor provides a philosophical basis for understanding cultural identity as an interpretive achievement that is historically embedded yet open to transformation. Contemporary scholars note that this hermeneutical ontology enables a normative grounding of intercultural dialogue without imposing cultural uniformity (Festenstein, 2021; Smith, 2024).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relevance of Taylor's hermeneutics for developing a robust model of interculturalism in Indonesia. By employing an ontological analysis centered on the philosophical category of substance, this article seeks to demonstrate how Taylor's framework can mediate between essentialist and anti-essentialist views of culture. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to recent debates in intercultural philosophy and provide conceptual guidance for cultural policy, education, and intercultural governance in plural democratic societies (Kymlicka, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2024).

Review of Literature

Contemporary debates on interculturalism are largely shaped by tensions between essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of culture. Essentialist approaches conceptualize culture as a relatively stable, inherited system of meanings that provides continuity, identity, and moral orientation. Recent literature acknowledges that such approaches remain influential in sustaining collective belonging and cultural resilience, particularly in societies with strong historical traditions (Silva & Torres, 2023). However, scholars increasingly criticize essentialism for its tendency to reify culture, overlook internal diversity, and inhibit intercultural dialogue by treating cultural boundaries as fixed and impermeable (Verhoeven & Martens, 2023).

In contrast, anti-essentialist perspectives emphasize the constructed, fluid, and contingent nature of culture. Influenced by post-structuralism and critical cultural studies, this body of literature highlights hybridity, power relations, and the ongoing negotiation of identity in a globalized world (Risi & Pronzini, 2024). While anti-essentialism has been praised for exposing exclusionary cultural narratives and opening space for marginalized voices, recent critiques argue that radical fluidity risks eroding the normative coherence of culture. Without some form of evaluative grounding, interculturalism may collapse into relativism, undermining its capacity to articulate shared values or ethical commitments (Foster, 2023; Park & Kim, 2023).

Against this backdrop, hermeneutical approaches to culture have gained renewed attention for their potential to mediate between stability and change. Hermeneutics conceptualizes culture as a process of meaning-making rooted in historical context, interpretation, and dialogue. Recent studies emphasize that cultural identities persist not through immutable essences but through interpretive continuity within shared horizons of meaning (Nguyen et al., 2022; Ramos & Oliveira, 2023). These approaches foreground understanding (*Verstehen*) over explanation, arguing that intercultural engagement requires participatory interpretation rather than detached analysis.

Within hermeneutical philosophy, the work of Charles Taylor occupies a central position in contemporary discussions of culture, identity, and recognition. Taylor's conception of human beings as self-interpreting animals provides an ontological account of why meaning, value, and moral orientation are constitutive of cultural life. Recent scholarship revisits Taylor's ideas to address challenges of pluralism, emphasizing the role of strong evaluation and dialogical recognition in sustaining democratic

and multicultural societies (O'Connor et al., 2022; Hassan & Ahmad, 2024). These studies highlight that cultural identity is neither purely subjective nor externally imposed, but emerges through dialogical engagement within shared moral horizons.

The concept of recognition has received particular attention in recent intercultural literature. Scholars argue that recognition functions not merely as a political demand but as a constitutive condition for identity formation and social cohesion (Garcia & Morales, 2023). Empirical and theoretical studies demonstrate that misrecognition leads to alienation, cultural distortion, and weakened participation, especially in plural societies marked by historical asymmetries of power (Hassan & Ahmad, 2024). However, much of this literature treats recognition primarily at the institutional or policy level, often neglecting its deeper ontological grounding in human self-interpretation as articulated by Taylor.

Recent studies on interculturalism in Indonesia predominantly focus on pragmatic concerns such as tolerance, conflict prevention, and multicultural education. Scholars emphasize the importance of national ideology and civic values in managing diversity, often referencing Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika as normative foundations for social cohesion (Silva & Torres, 2023; Park & Kim, 2023). While these studies provide valuable contextual insights, they tend to operate within functional or policy-oriented frameworks, leaving underlying philosophical assumptions about culture and identity insufficiently examined.

Digitalization and globalization have further complicated intercultural relations, a theme increasingly addressed in recent literature. Studies highlight how digital platforms intensify cultural interaction while simultaneously reducing recognition to visibility metrics and performative expression (Zhang & Morris, 2024). This development challenges traditional models of intercultural understanding by privileging speed and quantification over depth and dialogical engagement. Hermeneutical scholars argue that such conditions call for renewed attention to tacit, embodied, and pre-reflective dimensions of cultural meaning that resist full articulation in digital forms (Risi & Pronzini, 2024).

Overall, the literature reveals a persistent theoretical gap in intercultural studies, particularly in contexts like Indonesia where cultural traditions remain morally significant while undergoing rapid transformation. Although essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches offer valuable insights, both fall short of providing an ontologically grounded account of how cultural identity can be simultaneously stable, dynamic, evaluative, and dialogical. This study responds to that gap by advancing Charles Taylor's hermeneutical ontology as a mediating framework for interculturalism, offering a theoretically coherent and contextually relevant alternative for understanding cultural plurality in Indonesia.

Methodology: Ontology-Based Hermeneutical Analysis

This study employs a qualitative philosophical methodology grounded in ontological analysis within the tradition of hermeneutics. Rather than adopting an empirical or positivistic approach, the research focuses on examining the underlying assumptions about being, meaning, and cultural identity that shape theoretical positions in intercultural discourse. Ontology is particularly relevant for this study because debates between cultural essentialism and anti-essentialism are not merely methodological disagreements but reflect fundamentally different conceptions of what culture *is* (Zahavi, 2020; Smith, 2024).

Ontology-based analysis allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of cultural practices toward a deeper investigation of the conditions that make cultural continuity and transformation possible. Recent scholarship in social philosophy emphasizes that questions of identity, recognition, and intercultural relations require ontological clarification in order to avoid conceptual ambiguity and normative inconsistency (Rosa, 2022; Abbey, 2023). Accordingly, this research treats culture not simply as a social variable but as a mode of being constituted through meaning and interpretation.

The methodological framework is informed by philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the work of Charles Taylor. Hermeneutics is employed here not as a technique of textual interpretation alone, but as an ontological approach that understands human existence as fundamentally interpretive. From this perspective, social realities such as culture, identity, and tradition are constituted through ongoing processes of interpretation rather than fixed essences or purely contingent constructions (Taylor, 2020; Gadamerian reinterpretations in Grondin, 2021).

A central analytical category used in this study is the philosophical concept of *substance*. Traditionally associated with Aristotelian metaphysics, substance refers to that which persists through change. Recent philosophical discussions have revisited this concept in non-essentialist terms, arguing

that substance can be understood relationally and dynamically without reverting to rigid essentialism (Zahavi, 2020; DeRoo, 2022). In the context of cultural analysis, this category provides a way to conceptualize cultural identity as enduring yet transformable.

Operationally, the ontological analysis proceeds through three interconnected dimensions. First, substantial continuity is used to examine how cultures maintain recognizable identities over time without assuming immutable essences. This dimension addresses essentialist

claims by showing that continuity can emerge from shared interpretive frameworks rather than fixed cultural substances (Kymlicka, 2020; Modood, 2022). Second, substantial interaction focuses on how cultures encounter one another through dialogue, conflict, and mutual recognition. This dimension draws on the hermeneutical notion of the fusion of horizons, highlighting intercultural engagement as a process of reciprocal meaning-expansion rather than assimilation or relativistic coexistence (Zapata-Barrero, 2020; Festenstein, 2021). Third, substantial transformation analyzes how cultural identities change through reinterpretation while preserving normative depth. This dimension responds to anti-essentialist critiques by demonstrating that change does not entail the dissolution of cultural meaning (Rosa, 2022; Smith, 2024).

The primary sources of analysis consist of Taylor's major philosophical works on selfhood, interpretation, and recognition, complemented by recent secondary literature in intercultural philosophy, political theory, and social ontology published within the last five years. The Indonesian context functions as the empirical horizon of interpretation rather than as a dataset for generalization. This contextual positioning allows the study to articulate theoretical implications for Indonesia without reducing cultural complexity to case-study empiricism (Hoon, 2023; Arifianto, 2022).

By integrating ontological analysis with hermeneutical interpretation, this methodology enables a critical engagement with both essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms. It provides a systematic framework for evaluating their underlying assumptions and for articulating a mediating model of interculturalism grounded in meaning, normativity, and dialogical openness. As such, the methodology aligns with recent calls in intercultural studies for philosophically informed approaches capable of addressing cultural diversity beyond surface-level tolerance (Zapata-Barrero, 2024; Kymlicka, 2023).

Theoretical Framework: Essentialism, Anti-Essentialism, and Interculturalism

Theoretical debates on culture in contemporary social and political thought are largely structured around the opposition between cultural essentialism and cultural anti-essentialism. These two paradigms represent contrasting ontological assumptions about the nature of culture, identity, and social meaning. Understanding their respective strengths and limitations is essential for developing a coherent framework of interculturalism applicable to plural societies such as Indonesia.

Cultural Essentialism

Cultural essentialism is grounded in the assumption that cultures possess inherent and enduring characteristics that define the identity, values, and normative orientations of their members. From this perspective, culture is treated as a relatively stable substance that precedes individual agency and determines social behavior (Sen, 2020). Essentialist frameworks emphasize internal homogeneity, clear boundaries between cultural groups, and continuity rooted in tradition.

Recent scholarship has shown that essentialism continues to shape public discourse and policy, particularly in societies marked by ethnic and religious plurality (Modood, 2022). In Indonesia, essentialist assumptions are evident in narratives that equate cultural authenticity with ancestral tradition, religious orthodoxy, or ethnic purity (Burhani, 2021; Hoon, 2023). While such narratives may foster a sense of belonging and historical rootedness, they also risk reifying culture and legitimizing exclusionary practices.

Critically, essentialism tends to conflate historical continuity with ontological fixity. By treating cultural meanings as immutable, it obscures the interpretive processes through which traditions are maintained and transformed over time. Contemporary critics argue that this reification leads to symbolic violence, where cultural difference is naturalized and used to justify social hierarchies (Rosa, 2022). Thus, while essentialism accounts for cultural depth and continuity, it lacks the conceptual resources to explain cultural change without crisis.

Cultural Anti-Essentialism

Cultural anti-essentialism emerges as a reaction against the reifying tendencies of essentialism. Influenced by post-structuralist, constructivist, and postcolonial theories, anti-essentialism rejects the notion of fixed cultural essences and emphasizes contingency, hybridity, and fluidity (Hall, 2021). Culture, in this view, is understood as a dynamic process shaped by power relations, historical circumstances, and discursive practices.

Anti-essentialist approaches have been particularly influential in intercultural and diversity studies, as they successfully dismantle stereotypes and challenge deterministic accounts of identity (Meer, Modood, & Zapata-Barrero, 2021). In the Indonesian context, anti-essentialism has contributed to more nuanced understandings of hybrid identities, localized religious expressions, and cultural negotiation in everyday life (Arifianto, 2022).

However, recent debates point to significant limitations within radical anti-essentialism. By dissolving cultural identity into perpetual flux, anti-essentialist frameworks often struggle to account for the persistence of shared meanings and normative commitments (Kymlicka, 2020; Smith, 2024). Without some form of cultural stability, intercultural dialogue risks becoming shallow, as there is no enduring horizon of meaning from which dialogue can meaningfully proceed. Critics therefore argue that anti-essentialism, while normatively attractive, tends toward relativism and normative thinness (Modood, 2022).

Interculturalism as a Mediating Paradigm

Interculturalism has emerged as an attempt to move beyond the limitations of both essentialism and anti-essentialism. Unlike multiculturalism, which often prioritizes recognition and coexistence, interculturalism emphasizes interaction, dialogue, and mutual transformation among cultural groups (Zapata-Barrero, 2020). Its normative focus lies in fostering shared civic spaces while respecting cultural difference.

Despite its promise, interculturalism faces a persistent theoretical challenge. Without a clear ontological grounding, it risks either reproducing essentialist assumptions about bounded cultures or adopting anti-essentialist notions that weaken normative engagement (Meer et al., 2021). Recent scholars therefore stress the need for an ontologically informed interculturalism that can reconcile cultural continuity with openness to change (Kymlicka, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2024).

It is at this juncture that the hermeneutical philosophy of Charles Taylor becomes particularly relevant. Taylor's framework rejects both the notion of culture as a fixed substance and the idea of identity as an arbitrary construction. By conceptualizing humans as self-interpreting beings situated within historically formed horizons of meaning, Taylor provides an ontological account that supports intercultural dialogue without relativism (Abbey, 2020; Rosa, 2022).

Within this framework, culture can be understood as an interpretive substance—enduring through shared values and evaluative frameworks, yet continuously reshaped through dialogue and reinterpretation. Such an understanding allows interculturalism to retain normative depth while remaining open to critique and transformation. This theoretical synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for *critical interculturalism*, a model particularly suited to plural and democratic societies such as Indonesia.

Charles Taylor's Hermeneutical Ontology

The hermeneutical ontology developed by Charles Taylor offers a distinctive philosophical account of human identity, culture, and social meaning that transcends the limitations of both essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms. At the core of Taylor's ontology is a rejection of atomistic and naturalistic conceptions of the human subject, which reduce identity to either biological determinism or externally imposed social structures. Instead, Taylor situates human existence within a framework of meaning, interpretation, and evaluation (Abbey, 2020; Rosa, 2022).

Humans as Self-Interpreting Animals

A foundational concept in Taylor's ontology is the understanding of human beings as *self-interpreting animals*. This notion asserts that humans do not merely act within the world but continuously interpret the significance of their actions, identities, and social relations. Meaning-making, in this sense, is not an optional cognitive activity but an ontological condition of human existence (Taylor, 2020; Smith, 2024).

Recent philosophical scholarship emphasizes that self-interpretation distinguishes human social life from mechanistic or purely instrumental models of action. Cultural identities emerge through shared interpretive frameworks that define what is considered valuable, worthy, or meaningful within a community (Rosa, 2022). This conception enables an understanding of culture as neither a fixed substance nor a purely subjective construction, but as a lived horizon of meaning sustained through interpretive practices.

In intercultural contexts, the idea of self-interpreting agency implies that cultural understanding cannot be reduced to external observation or technical management. Instead, intercultural engagement requires interpretive openness to the moral and evaluative horizons through which others understand themselves (Festenstein, 2021).

Strong Evaluation and Moral Frameworks

Another key element of Taylor's hermeneutical ontology is the concept of *strong evaluation*. Strong evaluation refers to the human capacity to make qualitative distinctions between higher and lower goods, rather than merely choosing between preferences. According to Taylor, individuals and cultures are oriented toward moral frameworks that provide criteria for evaluating desires, actions, and ways of life (Abbey, 2023).

Recent discussions highlight the relevance of strong evaluation for intercultural theory, as it preserves the normative depth of cultural identities without resorting to moral absolutism (Modood, 2022; Smith, 2024). Cultures are thus understood as structured by substantive moral orientations that matter deeply to their members, even though these orientations remain open to reinterpretation and critique.

In the Indonesian context, this insight is particularly significant. Cultural and religious traditions function as sources of moral orientation that cannot be dismissed as mere social constructs without undermining their lived significance. Taylor's framework allows these traditions to be taken seriously while remaining subject to dialogical reflection and ethical evaluation.

The Fusion of Horizons and Intercultural Dialogue

Taylor's hermeneutical ontology also draws on the concept of the *fusion of horizons*, originally articulated within philosophical hermeneutics. Cultural understanding, from this perspective, occurs when distinct horizons of meaning encounter one another and undergo mutual transformation. Importantly, this process does not entail the erasure of difference but the expansion of understanding through dialogue (Grondin, 2021; Festenstein, 2021).

Recent intercultural scholarship emphasizes that the fusion of horizons provides a model for dialogue that avoids both assimilation and relativistic indifference (Zapata-Barrero, 2020; Kymlicka, 2023). In this model, participants remain rooted in their own evaluative frameworks while becoming open to learning from others. Such openness requires recognition of the other as a moral agent embedded in a meaningful cultural world.

Applied to Indonesia's plural social landscape, the fusion of horizons offers a normative framework for intercultural engagement grounded in respect, reciprocity, and ethical seriousness. It enables dialogue across ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries without demanding the abandonment of cultural identity.

Hermeneutical Ontology as a Mediating Framework

Taken together, the concepts of self-interpreting agency, strong evaluation, and the fusion of horizons constitute a hermeneutical ontology that mediates between essentialism and anti-essentialism. Culture, within this framework, can be understood as an interpretive substance—enduring through shared meanings and moral frameworks, yet continuously reshaped through historical experience and dialogue (Rosa, 2022; Abbey, 2023).

This ontological position avoids the reification of culture characteristic of essentialism, while also resisting the normative emptiness often associated with radical anti-essentialism. By grounding cultural identity in meaning and evaluation, Taylor's hermeneutics provides a philosophically robust foundation for interculturalism oriented toward mutual understanding and ethical coexistence.

As such, Taylor's hermeneutical ontology offers significant theoretical resources for rethinking intercultural relations in plural societies. It prepares the conceptual ground for the subsequent

discussion of how this framework can be operationalized within the Indonesian context to support a model of critical interculturalism.

Results and Discussion: Taylor's Hermeneutics in the Indonesian Context

This section discusses the implications of Charles Taylor's hermeneutical ontology for understanding and mediating intercultural relations in Indonesia. Rather than presenting empirical findings in a positivistic sense, the "results" here are conceptual outcomes derived from applying Taylor's ontological framework to the Indonesian intercultural context. The discussion demonstrates how Taylor's hermeneutics effectively addresses the shortcomings of both essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches while offering a normative model of interculturalism grounded in meaning, recognition, and dialogue.

Reinterpreting Cultural Continuity Beyond Essentialism

One significant outcome of applying Taylor's hermeneutical ontology is a reconceptualization of cultural continuity. In Indonesia, cultural continuity is often interpreted through essentialist narratives that portray ethnic and religious identities as fixed inheritances. Such narratives are evident in discourses surrounding adat traditions, religious orthodoxy, and claims of cultural authenticity (Burhani, 2021; Hoon, 2023). These interpretations frequently result in the reification of culture, where historically contingent meanings are treated as immutable truths.

Taylor's conception of culture as an interpretive achievement offers an alternative understanding. Cultural continuity, from this perspective, is sustained not by fixed essences but by shared frameworks of meaning that are continually reaffirmed through interpretation (Rosa, 2022). This insight allows Indonesian cultural traditions to be understood as enduring without being static. Traditions persist because they remain meaningful, not because they are ontologically frozen. As a result, cultural continuity can be affirmed without legitimizing exclusionary or deterministic claims.

Resisting Relativism in Anti-Essentialist Discourses

At the same time, Taylor's framework addresses the limitations of anti-essentialist approaches that emphasize cultural fluidity and hybridity. In contemporary Indonesian scholarship, anti-essentialism has contributed valuable insights into localized religious expressions, hybrid identities, and negotiated cultural practices (Arifianto, 2022). However, when taken to an extreme, such approaches risk dissolving cultural identity into subjective preference, thereby weakening shared moral horizons.

Taylor's notion of strong evaluation counters this tendency by reaffirming the normative depth of cultural meanings. Cultures are not merely assemblages of practices but are structured by qualitative distinctions concerning what is considered good, worthy, or valuable (Abbey, 2023). In the Indonesian context, this means that religious and cultural traditions function as moral frameworks that orient social life. Recognizing this evaluative depth prevents intercultural engagement from collapsing into relativism while remaining open to critique and reinterpretation (Modood, 2022; Smith, 2024).

Intercultural Dialogue as Fusion of Horizons

Another key result of applying Taylor's hermeneutics is a reconceptualization of intercultural dialogue. Intercultural interaction in Indonesia is often approached pragmatically, focusing on tolerance, coexistence, or conflict management. While these approaches are necessary, they frequently lack a deeper philosophical grounding that explains *how* understanding across difference is possible.

Through the concept of the fusion of horizons, Taylor provides a model of dialogue rooted in mutual recognition and interpretive openness. Intercultural understanding emerges when participants engage one another as bearers of meaningful moral worlds, rather than as representatives of static cultural categories (Festenstein, 2021). Recent intercultural theorists argue that this dialogical model enables learning and transformation without assimilation or domination (Zapata-Barrero, 2020; Kymlicka, 2023).

Applied to Indonesia's plural society, the fusion of horizons supports intercultural engagement across ethnic, religious, and ideological divides. It affirms difference while creating the possibility of shared understanding through ethical dialogue. This model is particularly relevant in addressing interreligious tensions, identity politics, and debates over national belonging.

Toward Critical Interculturalism in Indonesia

Taken together, these results point toward a model of *critical interculturalism* grounded in Taylor's hermeneutical ontology. This model differs from both essentialist multiculturalism and relativistic

pluralism. It affirms cultural authenticity without reification, recognizes cultural change without norm erosion, and situates intercultural dialogue within a shared ethical space.

Critical interculturalism emphasizes three principles: interpretive recognition, normative seriousness, and dialogical openness. These principles align with Indonesia's foundational commitment to unity in diversity, while offering philosophical resources to critically evaluate cultural practices that undermine justice or inclusion (Kymlicka, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2024).

By applying the hermeneutical insights of Charles Taylor to the Indonesian context, this study demonstrates that interculturalism need not choose between cultural stability and transformation. Instead, it can be grounded in an ontological understanding of culture as meaningful, evaluative, and dialogically constituted.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistent tension between cultural essentialism and cultural anti-essentialism in contemporary intercultural discourse reflects a deeper ontological problem concerning the nature of culture and identity. In plural societies such as Indonesia, neither paradigm is sufficient to account for cultural continuity and transformation simultaneously. Essentialism tends to reify culture and legitimize exclusion, while anti-essentialism risks dissolving cultural meaning into relativism and normative thinness.

By drawing on the hermeneutical philosophy of Charles Taylor, this study has demonstrated the relevance of a mediating ontological framework grounded in interpretation, meaning, and evaluation. Taylor's conception of human beings as self-interpreting animals provides a basis for understanding culture as an interpretive substance—enduring through shared moral frameworks while remaining open to historical change and dialogical engagement. Through the concepts of strong evaluation and the fusion of horizons, cultural identities can be affirmed without being absolutized, and intercultural dialogue can be pursued without collapsing into relativism (Abbey, 2023; Rosa, 2022).

Applied to the Indonesian context, Taylor's hermeneutical ontology enables a reconceptualization of interculturalism that moves beyond superficial tolerance or static recognition. The model of critical interculturalism articulated in this study emphasizes interpretive recognition, normative seriousness, and dialogical openness as foundational principles for intercultural engagement. This approach aligns with Indonesia's plural social reality and offers philosophical resources for addressing challenges related to identity politics, interreligious relations, and cultural governance (Kymlicka, 2023; Zapata-Barrero, 2024).

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its ontological clarification of interculturalism. By situating cultural identity within a hermeneutical framework, the article bridges the gap between essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives and enriches contemporary intercultural theory. Practically, the findings suggest that policies and educational initiatives aimed at managing cultural diversity should move beyond instrumental or procedural models toward approaches that cultivate interpretive understanding and ethical dialogue.

Future research may extend this framework by examining how Taylor's hermeneutical ontology can be operationalized in specific domains such as intercultural education, interreligious dialogue, and democratic governance in Indonesia. Empirical studies informed by this ontological perspective could further explore how interpretive recognition and fusion of horizons function in everyday intercultural encounters. In this way, Taylor's hermeneutics continues to offer valuable insights for navigating cultural diversity in an increasingly interconnected world.

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